



DEBORAH L. WEIKEL

WILD IRISH ROSE

A Historical Novel

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To Kiristi
I Love You

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PROLOGUE



For more than ten miles, one could smell the stench that drifted in the breeze from the once-beloved city. It was May 1865. The War Between the States had ended, but the destruction of the war lingered in the memories and hearts of those who had fought on either side. Richmond, Virginia, the capital of the Confederacy, lay in ruins from the war. When Robert E. Lee had fled Richmond, the Yankees had demolished Confederate stores and supplies, and then burned over seven hundred structures.

Now, more than one hundred thousand people crammed the streets of the dismal city. Between the burnt piles of ashes and rubble, mourners mingled with broken soldiers. Behind makeshift hospitals, shacks housed the decaying corpses of unfortunate soldiers. Tens of thousands of nameless grave markers filled the cemeteries. It was a sad sight for anyone with compassion, regardless of how one felt about the victory of the United States.

Through the city echoed the wails of women and children mourning the dead. Confederate soldiers tenderly furled their flags, their shrouds for dead hope. "Dixie" rang through the

streets, occasionally drowned out by angry threats against the oath of allegiance Southerners had been forced to sign.

Southern women spat upon any man wearing the Union uniform. For the most part, these Southern belles—once graced with the finest luxuries—now wore rags. A fortunate few women wore simple homespun frocks made by their loyal slaves. Plaited hats made from dried and bleached palmetto, adorned with chicken feathers, covered these proud women's heads. The knitted silk stockings they wore were made of scraps of silk, carded and spun into fine yarn.

The familiar blue of the Northern Billy Yanks and the grey of the Southern Johnny Rebs were not the only military uniforms seen in Richmond. Over 800,000 newcomers had arrived in America between 1861 and 1865, mostly from England, Ireland, and Germany. Many of these immigrants had fought in the war, particularly for the North, and many wore the uniform of their homeland's forces.

The return of peace was easier for the North than for the defeated South. Thousands of ex-Confederate soldiers returned to find their homes destroyed, their families in peril, and their fields overgrown with weeds. Because of the North's victory, all Confederate money was worthless, leaving Southerners penniless and unable to rebuild their plantations. Most landowners could not pay the back taxes on their plantations, so property was divided into smaller farms or rented to poor, white farmers. Thousands of freed Negroes roamed the South, without food or a place to live. Many of them begged to return to the only way of life they knew. A fortunate few found their way North.

Thus, the life of the elegant and grand South ended, dust to dust, ashes to ashes . . .

ONE



Blaise Cameron turned in his saddle and glanced behind him. Curling smoke still drifted in the cloudless sky from the war-torn city of Richmond. In every direction, burned and neglected fields riddled the horizon. Splendid mansions, now nothing but hollowed-out shells, dotted the dreary landscape.

Blaise urged his horse on in the unbearable spring heat. He removed his hat and wiped his brow with the back of his hand. In the distance, riders approached. As they drew near, Blaise saw they were Confederates heading home to Richmond. Most were on foot and wounded, their uniforms no more than rags covering their thin bodies.

With his hand on his holstered gun, Blaise guided his horse to the side of the road to let the Johnny Rebs pass. Blaise motioned his friend Jonas to follow his lead. The last thing he wanted was a disgruntled Confederate soldier shooting one last Blue Belly.

Blaise waited until the soldiers passed, then turned his horse back onto the road. Jonas stayed close, glancing behind him.

"We is mighty lucky them Rebs are plum tuckered out, Lieutenant Cameron."

Blaise massaged his left shoulder, where he had caught a bullet just before the war ended. The aching was a constant reminder he wasn't fit for traveling. "I don't blame them. I'm a bit tuckered out myself."

"We need to stop so you can rest. Ain't gonna do you no good if'n you're too sickly to make it home. We can go back to Richmond. It's only about ten miles or so back yonder."

Blaise shook his head. "I want to get as far from Richmond as I can. I won't feel safe until we're near the Northern lines. I'll be fine." He glanced at the big man riding beside him. "Do you have any regrets going to California with me, Jonas? I mean, you'll be leaving your family behind."

Jonas's cheerful smile faded. "I's born and raised on a large cotton plantation in South Carolina. As soon as I was big enough to work in the fields, the massa sold me. I never saw my ma or pa again. I could never find them now, if'n they were still alive."

Blaise fell into a melancholy mood as they pressed on, and from the looks of Jonas, he did the same. Dreams of the future and ghosts of the past engulfed Blaise's thoughts.

"Well, I'll be if it isn't Lieutenant Blaise Cameron and his faithful friend, Jonas."

Blaise dismounted and shook the hand of his comrade, Sergeant Peterson. "Ross, you son of a gun. I knew you were too mean to die."

Ross slapped Blaise on the shoulder and then shook hands with Jonas. "You should know. We've been fighting together for the past four years." Ross's laugh filled the camp. "I heard you

were in the hospital in Richmond.”

“I was.” Blaise winced in pain. “But I’m anxious to start home.” He rubbed his sore shoulder where Ross had given him a good whack. “What’re you doing in a Union camp instead of heading home yourself?”

“Those dad-burned rebels don’t want to sign the oath of allegiance.” Ross pulled his hat from his head and smacked it hard against his leg. “I gotta keep a troop handy in case there’s any disturbance. Hopefully, I’ll be able to head out of here as soon as a commanding officer arrives.”

Blaise shook his head. “I was afraid there’d be more trouble after Lincoln was murdered.”

“That was a durn shame. Lincoln worked hard to get the States united. I heard Richmond was nearly burned to the ground.”

“You heard right.” Blaise pulled his hat off and wiped the sweat beads from his forehead. “The worst was the dead and dying soldiers. You can’t walk down the sidewalks without stepping on dead bodies.” Blaise grimaced, knowing he’d replay the scenes in his sleep for years to come.

Ross shook his head. “I reckon I should be happy I’m here instead of in Richmond.”

Blaise glanced around the camp. A few of the soldiers huddled around the fire despite the hot weather, and the injured rested in tents. The men’s uniforms hung on their thin frames. Blaise had seen conditions like this more than once during the war. As he looked into the soldiers’ hollow-eyed faces and heard ragged coughing from the sick, he knew improper diet and disease had taken their toll.

“Thank goodness the war ended while we still had a few men to send home,” Ross said.

“I think we’ll all hear the hissing of bullets and the crackle of musketry for a while.” Bitterness filled Blaise’s voice.

"I know I will." Ross looked at his men. "Some of these guys are dead and don't even know it. They're just hanging on. We finally got food for them, but as you can see, some are too far gone. All I can do is make them feel comfortable until the good Lord takes them home."

Blaise didn't want to disillusion his friend, but no God would allow war to happen. In the four years he'd known Ross, the man had never faltered from his faith.

Ross grabbed Blaise by the arm. "I almost forgot I have a letter for you. The mail pouch arrived yesterday. I'm supposed to send it on to Richmond the first chance I get."

The sergeant ordered a private to attend to Blaise's and Jonas's horses and then ushered the two men into his tent. He sifted through the mailbag until he found the letter. With a wide grin, he handed it to Blaise. "I think you need a bath and something to eat. You can't go home in that sorry state."

Blaise smiled as he looked down at his tattered and soiled uniform. "You're probably right, Ross. I'll clean up after I eat."

He directed his attention to the envelope and noted his sister's name in the top left-hand corner. "First thing I'm going to do is read my letter."

Ross and Jonas left the tent, leaving Blaise to read his mail in private. He opened the letter, his hands shaking with anticipation. He hadn't heard from home in so long.

My dearest brother,

I'm writing in hopes you receive this letter before you start your journey home, and praying you're alive to read it.

I'm at Aunt May and Uncle Henry's in Pittsburgh. Something happened, but I won't burden you with the

details until I see you. Please return here first.

Aunt May and Uncle Henry send their love as well.

Love, Amanda

Blaise read the letter again, his body tense with dread. What had happened while he was away? He'd thought that all of his troubles were over and that he could settle down to a normal life again. And while he hoped Mandy was exaggerating, his gut feeling told him she wasn't.

He folded the letter and slipped it into his pocket as he entered the mess tent. Then he took a seat across the plank table from Ross and Jonas. Ross pushed a mug of steaming acorn coffee in front of him.

"Man, you look terrible. Did you receive bad news from home?"

Blaise nodded and ran his hand through his hair. He dropped his hat on the bench next to him and glanced around the crowded tent, wishing for a break from the seemingly endless heat. A row of tables, positioned down the center of the huge tent, accommodated the men. The din of muffled voices was deafening, and Blaise felt the need to shout in order for Ross and Jonas to hear him. "Yeah, from my sister, Amanda. She didn't go into details. I have to join her in Pittsburgh."

Ross swallowed a mouthful of cornbread. "So you'll be going to Pennsylvania before heading to California?"

"I have no choice, Ross." Turning to Jonas, Blaise asked, "How about you, Jonas? How do you feel about going to Pittsburgh?"

"I goes where you goes, Lieutenant Cameron."

"Well, then we'll be on our way after we eat." Blaise grabbed a plate and piled it with food. They weren't the best beans and

cornbread he'd eaten, but they were food.

Ross took a sip of coffee. "You should stay the night and rest up first. You both look beat. I doubt you could stay in the saddle."

Blaise shook his head, then swallowed some beans. "No, I don't think so. I'm anxious to return to my family." He took another bite of beans and washed them down with the bitter coffee substitute.

"I don't blame you." Ross pushed his plate away. "I'd like to be heading home too, only I don't have any family to return to like you do."

Blaise saw the bleak look on his young friend's face. "We can always use a good foreman on the ranch. If you find returning home isn't what you want, come to California."

"Thanks for the offer, Blaise. I may take you up it."

Blaise took Amanda's letter from his pocket. He removed the letter and then handed the envelope to Ross. "You can reach me at this address—" he smiled "—in case a replacement comes for you before I head west."

Ross took the envelope and looked at the address, then brought the envelope to his nose. "Hmm, smells pretty. I sure hope your sister is better looking than you."

Blaise laughed. "She was the last time I saw her." He didn't want to hurt Ross's feelings, but Amanda would never consider the tall, raw-boned Swede as a suitor. Ever since their parents sent her east to school, Amanda's ideals had changed. Only a well-educated man with money would do for her now.

Blaise and Jonas finished their meal and then started their journey to Pittsburgh. Hastened by the pit in his stomach, Blaise drudged on without stopping until they were too weary to continue.

When they camped that evening, neither Blaise nor Jonas

had the energy to start a fire, so they just huddled under their blankets.

Blaise searched the inky sky dotted with sparkling stars. After standing guard at night for the past four years, relaxing felt like a luxury.

He thought of Amanda. He and Jonas would reach Pittsburgh the next day, and the mystery of her letter would be revealed. What kind of trouble could his parents have on the ranch?

If I were a praying man, now would be a good time to start, Blaise thought. Then again, he had gotten along fine without any help from God, so why start now? He had survived the war on his own merits, he decided, and he would make it through this. But his philosophy didn't bring the comfort he expected.

Blaise searched the darkened sky, focusing on the moon as it cast its light on them. The only sound he heard was Jonas's soft snoring. Finally, Blaise drifted off into a troubled sleep.

TWO



Rosaleen Katherine O'Shay sat at her sewing machine, trying not to stare at the company clock. The last minutes of the day always seemed to drag. Rosaleen's back ached from the constant stooping over the hated machine. Her leg muscles cramped from using the foot treadle for hours without stopping. How could her mother endure working at the sewing factory twelve hours a day at her age?

Rosaleen knew she shouldn't complain. At least she had a job to help her parents. The hardships of life in Ireland were still fresh on her mind, even though she and her family had been in America for a year.

She reached for another pair of jeans and started to sew on the belt loops. It was nice working on something besides military uniforms.

As she sewed, Rosaleen's thoughts drifted to the past. She missed the lush green fields of Ireland, the rock walls interweaving across the open meadows like featherstitching on a quilt. She longed for the home of her birth, the small village

nestled in a valley surrounded by heather, with sheep grazing in the misty distance.

There was no longer a future for the poor farmer in Ireland. England was Ireland's mistress. Queen Victoria directed Parliament to give every family twelve pence to sustain them from harvest to harvest, but it wasn't nearly enough to feed a family. Many an Irishman tried to slay a greedy landlord rather than watch his starving children die before his eyes.

With so many violent acts by the rebellious farmers, it was against the law for a person to leave his or her cottage between sunset and sunrise. If anyone was caught outside, regardless of the reason, greedy land agents would arrest the person for "the crime against the queen and the constitution of the realm." To teach the violator to respect British law, the penalty for such a crime was imprisonment for fourteen years.

Rosaleen stretched her aching back, glancing at the clock once more. The floor lady glared at her, so she sighed and grabbed another pair of jeans.

The drone of the sewing machines lulled Rosaleen into deep thought. She recalled her grandparents, who had lived in Ireland with her family in a small, thatched cottage. It wasn't their land, but the landlord allowed them to rent it for half of their crops.

Her family would barter sheep's wool to the village shop owner for seed potatoes. Then they would till the land and plant the potatoes, praying for a good crop. Times were tough, but the O'Shay clan weathered them together.

One night when Rosaleen's grandfather went to gather peat from the sea for their fires, a land agent caught him and charged him with trespassing on the queen's land and for being out after dark. As punishment, the family's potato crop was seized, and England sent her grandfather to a penal colony in Australia.

He died before his sentence was over. Soon after, Rosaleen's grandmother passed away of a broken heart.

The O'Shay family went deeper into poverty. They made a meager existence but didn't have any crops to give the landlord for the rent. The rich Anglo-Irish landlord evicted them and had the cottage burned so no one could use it. The land then became graze land for fat English cattle.

The O'Shays weren't the only family left homeless. Rosaleen recalled seeing small children so thin they couldn't stand on their own. Their fleshless, half-naked bodies and their small faces bloated a greenish hue would haunt her dreams forever. Grown men scrounged in turnip fields for food to feed their families. Evicted families wandered along the high road with nowhere to go. Prisons filled with thousands of people arrested for vagrancy.

Finally, Rosaleen's parents decided to leave Ireland and go to America, the promised land. Thousands of other families made the same choice.

The O'Shays sailed to America on *The Queen*. Of the 493 passengers who boarded the ship in Ireland, 137 died at sea of famine fever. Due to the number of deaths on these harrowing voyages, the vessels were often referred to as "coffin ships." Many passengers who survived the ordeal ended up dying in towns along America's coast.

After reaching Pennsylvania, the O'Shay family planned to journey west to California to homestead a farm, but when they arrived in America, their poverty forced them to stay in the city. The Civil War raged, and with so many soldiers to clothe, the factories boomed with new business.

Rosaleen's father and brother found jobs working in a coal mine. She worried about her father's health almost constantly. With his chronic cough and fatigue, she feared he was contracting the black lung from breathing in the coal dust.

Rosaleen's brother, Shawn, seemed much older than his twenty-five years, probably from working sixteen hours every day without adequate rest. Often her father and Shawn came home with barely enough energy to finish supper before falling asleep.

Since Rosaleen's father, Patrick, worked at the coal mine, they had to live at the company housing district. The mining company forced all workers to buy their supplies at exorbitant prices at the company store, making it impossible for workers to get ahead. The coal mining company even owned the house the O'Shays lived in, if you could call it a house. The bitter cold seeped through the cracks in the walls of the one-room shack, making it unbearable in the winter months.

Rosaleen's twelve-year-old sister, Shannon, also worked hard. While the rest of the family went to work, she stayed home and took care of the house, and she had supper ready for them when they returned home each night.

Every day, Rosaleen prayed for a miracle that would free her family from the poverty of the city and allow them to purchase a farm.

Still immersed in thought, Rosaleen didn't hear the quitting buzzer. She felt a gentle tap on her shoulder and looked up into her mother's weary face.

"Rosaleen, lass, 'tis time to go home," Maureen O'Shay said softly. "Ye work too hard for such a young girl."

Rosaleen strained to stand on her sore legs. "Nay, Mama, 'tis ye who works too hard."

"I be knowin' yer tired, lass, but ye must watch yer tongue. I'll not have me own daughter talkin' with the Irish brogue. 'Tis America we live in now."

"Aye, Mama, I'm sorry. It just slips out when I'm not thinkin' properly."

“’Tis all right, Rosaleen. I’ll be forgivin’ ye this time.” Mrs. O’Shay smiled tenderly. “’Tis for ye own good, lass. Yer da and me only want the best for ye.”

“Aye, Mama, I know, but I’m proud to be Irish,” Rosaleen said stubbornly.

“I be proud too, but I’ll not have any kin of mine bein’ mocked at.”

There was no use arguing with her mother. Rosaleen followed Maureen O’Shay to the cloakroom. As she helped her with her shawl, Rosaleen noticed how thin her mother was. *Lord, bless me that I may be strong for me family*, she prayed. *Mama and Da cannot take care of themselves forever. I need to be able to provide for them.*

If only there was more she could do to help her parents. With a troubled sigh, Rosaleen headed for the factory door.

Suddenly, Ward Masters, the factory owner, stood in her path. She tried to move around him but he grabbed her arm. “Just a minute, Rosaleen. I want to speak with you. I want you in my office, now.”

Jerking her arm free, Rosaleen glared at Masters. “Nay, Mr. Masters, ’tis quittin’ time and I’m goin’ home. Now let me pass.”

Masters stepped in front of Rosaleen again. “Not so fast, Rosaleen. I said I wanted to speak with you. I’m having a party tonight and I want you there as a serving wench.”

“Bah, ’tis no servin’ maid ye seek, ’tis a harlot for yer lowlife comrades. I am not a slave, Mr. Masters, and I will not do as ye bid.”

“Yes, you will, if you want to keep your jobs!” Masters threw himself between Rosaleen and her mother, his voice growing louder with each word. Then, turning to Mrs. O’Shay, he smiled and said calmly, “You better tell your daughter to do as I say, or I’m firing the both of you.”

Mrs. O'Shay stepped closer until she was face to face with him. "Nay, Mr. Masters. Ye'll not fire us. We quit. Me daughter will not be comin' to yer house tonight. No job is worth me own child."

"You'll both live to regret this," Masters threatened. "I won't give up that easily."

Rosaleen shot back with equal venom, "I wouldn't be stirrin' up more trouble for yerself, unless ye want some of these fine ladies standin' here listenin' to tell their menfolk how ye degrade their wives and daughters."

Masters' mouth flew open and his face went red with rage. "No one would dare turn on me!"

Rosaleen laughed, but deep down she was as frightened as a lamb at slaughter. "Are ye threatenin' all of yer employees, Mr. Masters?"

She watched as Masters' face paled. It was obvious he didn't want anyone finding out how he obtained his girls. With slavery abolished, Rosaleen knew it was difficult for him to find decent women to satisfy his friends and associates.

Masters ran his fingers over his sweaty forehead. Rosaleen followed his gaze to the crowd of workers that had gathered.

He turned back to Rosaleen and her mother. "Get out of here and don't come back begging for your jobs." Then, he jerked his head toward the crowd and shouted, "Get on home or you're all fired!"

Rushing out the front doors of the sewing factory, Rosaleen mumbled under her breath as her mother trailed behind her. Jobs were scare since the war ended. What would they do now?

"Rosaleen, I do not want ye tellin' yer da we lost our jobs today. We may find another tomorrow. I do not want to add a burden on him."

Rosaleen nodded in agreement, but she feared they would not

be so lucky.

Coaches and wagons crammed the streets, and the boardwalk was crowded with people. Most of the men were factory workers and shopkeepers, and the majority of the women were barmaids, heading to work at the many pubs in the red-light district. The sewing factory was located in the middle of the worst side of Pittsburgh.

Rosaleen glanced down the street, took her mother's arm, and started to cross. Then she heard her mother scream just as a horse reared in front of them. Stumbling back, she tripped over her mother's foot and landed in the dirt.

"Ye filthy brute!" Rosaleen shouted. "What are ye doin', tryin' to kill me?"

"What in tarnation were you doing walking down the middle of the street? Don't you have any sense in that pretty little head of yours?"

Rosaleen looked up at the dirty soldier grinning down at her from his horse. She rose to her feet with as much dignity as possible and tried to brush the dust from her backside. She grabbed her bonnet and plopped it over her untamed mane.

"How dare ye insinuate I'm in the wrong! Yer nothin' but a trail-dusty *jackeen*, a blackguard with the manners of a pig." It was the worst insult she could think of. "If ye cannot brin' yerself to help a lady in distress, at least ye could apologize for yer blunder."

"I don't see a 'lady' in distress," the soldier replied, casting Rosaleen a lopsided grin. He tipped his hat and winked at her, then urged his horse on down the street.

Rosaleen felt her face turn red. *First, he humiliated me by knocking me down in the dirt, she thought with a scowl, and then he didn't even have the courtesy to offer any assistance!* She had encountered many soldiers in Pittsburgh lately but none as rude

as this one. Clearly, this soldier was accustomed to flirting with anyone who wore a skirt. Yet Rosaleen had to admit he had the most gorgeous blue eyes she'd ever seen. Even the sound of his voice had caused her pulse to race.

"No lady, indeed." She picked up a rock and threw it, hitting him in the middle of the back.

The soldier stopped his horse and turned, then removed his hat and placed it over his heart. "I'm wounded at how callous you are to a returning soldier who fought bravely for this country. I deserve at least a kiss from such a fair damsel."

Rosaleen gaped at the man in astonishment, yet something in her wondered what it would be like to kiss such a rake. "If it's a kiss ye want, there's plenty of them workin' girls down the street. I'm sure they'd oblige ye. Now if ye do not mind, me mother and me are in a hurry."

"You might be right, beautiful Irish lassie. I do need a woman to kiss, not a spoiled child." The soldier bowed to Mrs. O'Shay. "My regards to you, ma'am. You better get your daughter married so she can stay off the streets."

The handsome stranger gave Rosaleen a devilish grin. "See you around, beautiful." He turned in his saddle and continued down the street as though nothing unusual had occurred.

Rosaleen barely held her temper as she heard the soldier's infuriating laugh trickle in the breeze.

"You should be ashamed of yerself, Rosaleen Katherine, letting a handsome Blue Belly give ye a wink and a smile after he nearly ran you over with his horse! He is right about one thin'. Ye need a man of yer own. I be thinkin' ye need to be lookin' for a husband."

A sigh escaped Rosaleen's lips as she took her mother's arm and they started across the street again. "What would ye have me do, Mama, run down one of those scarecrows who's returned

from the war and beg him to marry me? It's not as if I have many choices. Besides, ye and Da need me help."

Mrs. O'Shay smiled at her daughter. "Nay, Rosaleen Katherine, I wouldn't like ye to marry a scarecrow. What about the young lads who came to America with us, will they not do? Surely ye can find a suitable husband among them."

Rosaleen threw her mother a disgusted look. "Mama, they're like me brothers, not a husband."

Mrs. O'Shay laughed. "Well, I'm sure the good Lord has someone in mind for ye."

Twinkling blue eyes filled Rosaleen's thoughts.

THREE

Blaise Cameron heaved a sigh of relief as he stood in front of his aunt and uncle's townhouse. The beautiful home hadn't changed much since his childhood. The well-manicured lawns were a welcome sight after the barren fields he had passed on his journey to Pittsburgh. One would never know a war had just ended.

Jonas tied their horses to the hitching post. "It's a mighty fancy house. Is you sure your folks won't mind you bringing a darky home, Lieutenant Cameron?"

"Of course not. Abolishing slavery was the reason I joined the army."

"I think I'll wait for you out here just the same."

Blaise watched as Jonas stuffed his hands deep into his pockets. "Look, you've fought by my side for almost four years. I'm no longer your commanding officer. I'm your friend. You need a decent meal, and a soft, clean bed to sleep in for a change."

Jonas nodded. "I reckon it's all right if you say so."

Blaise started up the massive steps with Jonas following. Blaise removed his hat and slapped it against his shirt and pants

several times to get rid of some of the trail dust. Then he ran his hand through his hair and knocked on the great oak door.

* * * * *

When the door opened, a solemn man clad in black stood before him.

“Smitty, how are you?” Blaise greeted with a broad smile.

The manservant, Smith, stared at the unkempt, bearded soldier before him. “Mr. . . . er . . . Lieutenant Cameron, is that really you, sir? Miss Amanda will be happy to see you. She was afraid you might not have survived the war.”

“Where is, Mandy, Smitty? Is she well?”

Before Smith could answer Blaise, an excited squeal echoed down the long corridor and running feet sounded on the tiled floor.

“Blaise! Is it really you?” Amanda cried as she ran into her brother’s arms. “Oh, praise Jesus, you’re alive! My prayers have been answered!”

“How could you doubt my ability to thrash those rebels without help from the Deity?” Blaise teased as he picked his sister up and twirled her.

“Don’t make fun of me, Blaise Cameron, and put me down,” Amanda said, feigning ire. “I don’t care if you are a lieutenant or not. You’re still my brother. And the comment about the Deity—” she wagged her finger at him “—you’ll find the need one of these days.”

Amanda noticed Jonas and extended her hand in greeting. “You must be Jonas. Blaise mentioned you many times in his letters. I hope you’ll be happy living in the North.”

Jonas grinned sheepishly. “I sure will, Miz Cameron. I’m gonna like it right fine.”

“I bet you’re both hungry.” Amanda turned to the manservant. “Smith, can you show Jonas to the kitchen? Have the cook prepare him anything he wants and have a bath and room prepared for both Jonas and my brother. Have a tray sent into the drawing room for Lieutenant Cameron. The cook knows what he likes.”

The siblings entered the drawing room, and Amanda went to the sideboard to pour Blaise a glass of brandy.

Blaise moved about the room, fingering little trinkets and looking at family photographs on the mantle. “It’s so strange. Nothing has changed since I last visited.”

“Here, Blaise.” Amanda handed the glass to her brother.

Blaise waved the offer away. “No thanks, sis. I haven’t drunk liquor in ages. I’d rather have a glass of milk.”

Amanda summoned the kitchen maid for a pitcher of milk. When it arrived, she watched her brother down a tall glass and pour himself another. The look of pure delight on Blaise’s visage almost made her laugh. In that moment, he looked just like the little boy she remembered from their youth.

Blaise sipped the second glass of milk, obviously savoring every swallow. He had changed little over the past four years, though he was thinner and the worry lines around his eyes more prominent. His hair looked darker than when he’d left, but Amanda surmised that dirt was the cause. A shaggy beard hid the firmness of his jawbone and high cheekbones, but his eyes were similar to those she saw every day when she looked into the mirror. Blaise’s blue eyes were a little sadder and wearier, but they were still the hue of a summer’s sky.

Noticing his dispirited smile, Amanda cringed inwardly, for now she must tell him the dreadful news. How would they endure the inevitable hardships ahead of them?

A knock sounded and a serving girl entered the room with a large tray laden with food. Amanda instructed her to place the

tray on the table before the settee. Blaise stared at the tempting repast before him, and Amanda watched as he started on delicious beefsteak, pan-fried potatoes smothered with gravy, and thick slices of bread with strawberry jam. Long ears of corn smothered in butter were a favorite of his since childhood. Dessert was a giant piece of the cook's special three-layer chocolate cake.

"I feel like I've died and gone to heaven. I can't remember the last time I had beefsteak."

"Didn't you eat well while you were away?" Amanda asked, relieved he hadn't mentioned her letter yet.

Blaise cut off a large chunk of steak and popped in into his mouth. "Not if you consider pigeons, mice, and rats a tasty meal."

"You're not serious!" Amanda shrieked, suddenly nauseous. "You didn't really eat mice and rats, did you?"

Blaise wiped the milk mustache from his lips. "Sure. They weren't too bad planked and broiled. When we really ate good, we had salt pork and hardtack."

Amanda waved a scented hankie over a crinkled brow, tears filling her eyes. "Oh, Blaise, was war really that bad?"

Blaise put this fork down, dabbed his mouth with his napkin, and took Amanda's hand. "Yes, Mandy, it was that bad. Scurvy and typhoid cut soldiers down faster than the Rebels did. In the winter months, I thought I'd die from the cold. The tents were unheated, and many nights we didn't have any blankets to keep us warm. The rain and snow made the roads impassable, and many soldiers didn't even have a pair of boots to wear.

"We didn't even have coffee to keep us warm. Instead, we substituted it with parched corn, and when that was gone, we used acorns. Some soldiers ate mule meat and rancid bacon, but they were the lucky ones. When I was wounded, I was actually relieved because I had a dry bed to sleep in."

Amanda pulled her hand from her brother's grasp. Her

delicate fingers clasped her throat. "You were wounded? Why didn't you tell me?"

"Mandy, dear," Blaise began softly, "I don't think you realize what Richmond is like now. There was no way I could get a message to you. The few men still able to get around after the war were busy trying to save soldiers' lives. Andersonville Prison was a pest-filled cage, and thousands died there of disease, hunger, and exposure. There was no way a Southerner would help a Blue Belly. They would just as soon shoot you as look at you."

"Oh, Blaise, how could you endure the hardships?" Amanda whispered. Using her hankie, she dabbed the tears that threatened to spill from her eyes.

Blaise leaned back in his chair. "It was a terrible, frightening experience, but I would do it all over again if I had to. If you saw how the slaves were treated, you'd understand. They lived on slave row in crude cabins with the barest of necessities. They had little food to eat and only rags to wear, and that was when times were prosperous for the Southerners. They sold and bought slaves like cattle. I'll never forget the screams of terror when they sold small children away from their parents. They were abused far worse than I could ever tell you."

Amanda sprang from the settee. "Don't tell me any more, Blaise! I can't bear to think of the suffering those poor people endured!"

Blaise cleared his throat. "I'm sorry, Mandy. I shouldn't have told you. That's why Father bought Patsy years ago. Her master wanted to sell her to a wealthy plantation owner as breeding stock. When Father found out, he bought her."

Amanda turned to face Blaise. "Surely, you're mistaken. Patsy was a young girl when Father brought her home."

Shaking his head, Blaise leaned forward in his chair and grabbed the saucer that held the chocolate cake. He cast his gaze

down as though embarrassed to face his sister's stare. "She was brought to us for amusement."

"I don't want to hear any more, Blaise." Amanda walked to the fireplace. "I mean it. No wonder Father wouldn't let me go south with him."

Blaise changed the subject. "Speaking of Father, where are he and Mother? Where are Aunt May and Uncle Henry? I thought they'd be here to greet me."

Amanda slowly slunk into a chair next to the fireplace, wringing the hankie in her hands. Taking a deep breath, she looked directly at Blaise. "Aunt May and Uncle Henry had an appointment to see Mr. Withers. We had no idea when you'd come, so we decided to contact him for advice."

Blaise's body tensed and his jaw muscles twitched beneath the beard. Amanda lowered her gaze, afraid of what he might read on her countenance.

He pushed the small table away from him. "What in tarnation does Mother and Father's attorney have to do with anything?"

Amanda winced, though she knew Blaise only raised his voice out of concern. She bit her lower lip to keep from crying. *Please, Lord, let Blaise understand. Guide my words.*

By this time, Blaise stood in front of her. "Come on, Amanda, stop stalling and tell me what's going on. Where are Mother and Father?"

Amanda saw the anger in Blaise's eyes. With no alternative but to tell him the truth, she prayed again silently, then began, "I'm sorry, Blaise, I didn't want to burden you with such bad news without Aunt May and Uncle Henry here. I suppose I may as well tell you. We lost the ranch."

Amanda let her shoulders slump. "I—I don't know how Mother and Father are. I don't even know if they're still alive. I've begged God to please let them be safe." Amanda sobbed into

her damp hankie, and when she looked up, she noticed that the color had drained from Blaise's face.

"What do you mean Mother and Father may not be alive? What in blazes happened since I've been away?" Blaise's words reverberated off the silent walls.

Amanda ran from the drawing room and rushed to the entry hall. When she saw her aunt and uncle enter with Mr. Withers, she ran into her aunt's outstretched arms, weeping in near hysteria. "Oh, Aunt May, Blaise is here. I just know he's going to hate me for leaving Mother and Father."

When Amanda heard Blaise approaching, she pulled away from her aunt's embrace.

May Cameron gave her nephew the once-over with narrowed eyes. "You should be ashamed of yourself, Blaise Cameron! You haven't seen your sister in four years, and before you even find out the details of this distasteful situation, you blame her. Amanda blames herself enough without you adding to her guilt."

Blaise's mouth flew open as he stared at his aunt. "I have no idea what you're talking about. Would you please explain to me what's going on?"

Amanda's sobs subsided as May held her gently. "It's all right, darling." Then the older woman scowled at Blaise. "We'll speak of this in the drawing room. I'll not have the servants gossiping."

After the small group adjoined to the drawing room, May took charge. "What has Amanda told you so far?"

Blaise didn't care for the tone of his aunt's voice, but he let it pass out of concern for his parents. "She said we lost the ranch and that she didn't know if Father and Mother were alive."

May looked at her niece. "You've got to inform Blaise what happened, darling. Start at the beginning." Frowning at Blaise, she added, "I don't want you to say a word until Amanda is finished. Do you understand?"

Blaise ignored his aunt and turned to his sister. "Please, sis, tell me what happened. I promise I won't blame you."

He sat on the settee and patted the place next to him. Amanda reluctantly accepted the offered seat. Everyone chose a chair, except May, who stood next to Amanda with her eyes pinned on Blaise.

Inside, he was screaming. He wanted to shake the information from his sister. It took every bit of willpower he could muster to patiently wait for her to begin.

"All right, Blaise," Amanda finally said, "I'll start at the beginning. About two years ago, a man by the name of Lance Kincaid moved to Stockton. We met at the Thompsons' barn dance."

Amanda closed her eyes as though remembering a special occasion. "We fell in love and were to be married. At least I *thought* Lance loved me. All the local girls swooned over him. I was honored he chose me over all of the pretty girls. Annalee and I had words over him, and you know how close we are."

Blaise wanted to shout for Amanda to stop with the romantic dribble and tell him what happened, but he had promised her he'd stay calm.

"Anyway," Amanda continued, "a month before we were to be married, Father found out something about Lance's past and confronted him with the rumors. I don't know what the rumors were, but the next thing I knew Father called off the wedding.

"I rode into Stockton, hoping we would elope, but I found Lance having an affair with Mary Walters. You'll never know what a shock it was for me to find them together.

“When I told Mother and Father what happened, they thought it would be best if I came to Pittsburgh to stay with Aunt May and Uncle Henry until the scandal died down. I thought it was a good idea at the time. After three months, Mother stopped sending her weekly telegraphs, and I got worried.

“I took a clipper ship to San Francisco, but when I arrived home I found that Lance had taken over our ranch. I asked where Mother and Father were, and I demanded that Lance leave. He only laughed at me and then had two cowhands drag me into the house. They locked me in my room for two days before Patsy finally found a way to help me escape. I couldn’t find anyone to help me in town, so I came back to Aunt May’s to stay until you returned.” Amanda bowed her head in shame.

Blaise could almost feel the agony he read in her ashen features. He drew her to him and felt her body tremble as she cried, releasing the emotions she had obviously hidden since this terrible ordeal started. “It’s all right, sis,” he whispered. “I don’t blame you for what happened. None of this is your fault.”

Amanda pulled from her brother’s embrace. “Yes, it was my fault! If I hadn’t brought Lance to the ranch, none of this would’ve happened. If I’d stayed with Mother and Father instead of running away like a spoiled child, I’d know what happened to them. If only—”

Blaise interrupted, “Mother and Father told you to leave, remember? If you had stayed, Kincaid would have you also. I’m grateful you’re safe.”

Amanda reached over and clung to her brother once more. “I know all will be well now that you’re home, Blaise.”

“Don’t worry, sister, dear, I’ll find out what happened to Mother and Father. I promise.”

Still holding his sister, Blaise looked at his uncle and then Mr. Withers. “Why didn’t you contact the law and have this

Kincaid thrown off the Buckshot Ranch? Have you found out anything about my parents or what rock Kincaid crawled out from under?"

"Come, my boy," Henry Cameron said with a nervous chuckle. "Of course I tried to find out what happened. Lance Kincaid *is* the law in Stockton now."

Blaise patted Amanda's hand and then rose from the settee. "I'm not your 'boy,' Uncle Henry," he said testily. "I'm thirty years old, so you can treat me as an adult."

"I'm sorry, Blaise." Henry dabbed the sweat from his brow. "I didn't mean to sound disrespectful. Maybe Mr. Withers can explain it better than I."

With shaking hands, Henry poured himself a glass of strong Irish whiskey. Then he mumbled, "Would you like some whiskey, Blaise? Mr. Withers?"

"I haven't had a drink in some time, Uncle Henry. I'll have tea with Amanda and Aunt May."

After pouring Mr. Withers a drink, Henry settled down in a chair, looking relieved he was no longer the subject of Blaise's ire.

"Well, Mr. Withers, are you going to tell me what you know?" Blaise demanded as he sat down next to Amanda.

Mr. Withers finished his drink in one big gulp. "Your uncle is correct. We did contact the authorities in Stockton about the whereabouts of your parents. Everyone we talked to seemed reluctant to speak of Mr. Kincaid. We did discover, however, that the new marshal is on Mr. Kincaid's payroll."

Blaise cast Mr. Withers a perplexed look. "What happened to Christopher Simms? He was marshal when I left."

"He joined the war right after you did," Amanda said. "I thought you knew."

Mr. Withers sighed, "So, you see what we've been up against,

Blaise. I checked Mr. Kincaid out thoroughly. He was a blockade runner for the South. The Union army found out about him, but he escaped when they tried to capture him. I contacted the Union army and told them his whereabouts, but they were too busy fighting the war. He was out of their hair, so he was our problem. Mr. Kincaid must have thought California was far enough away from the war.

"I have no idea what he wants with your parents' ranch." Mr. Withers paused and then patted Blaise on the shoulder. "I do know your parents are still alive, for all of the bank drafts since their disappearance have been signed by your father. I'm sorry, Blaise, that you had to come home to this. I wanted to write you, but your uncle said it was impossible to locate you."

Blaise wasn't about to sit back and let anyone harm his family, and it was obvious no one wanted to get involved with pushing Lance Kincaid off the Buckshot Ranch. "The only thing I can see to do is go to California myself. I'll find out where my parents are if it's the last thing I do."

"That is the worst thing you could do, Blaise," Henry warned. "If you return home hotheaded and full of vengeance, Kincaid will kill you."

Amanda grabbed Blaise's hand and held it tightly between her two small ones. "You can't go back alone, Blaise! Uncle Henry is right—Lance will kill you. There were only a couple of loyal cowhands lefts at the ranch, not counting Patsy, and Lance has probably bought them off by now. That means Patsy is the only one we can trust. Lance is a powerful man with dozens of men to help him."

"I can't allow this man to take our ranch and never find out what happened to Mother and Father."

"I realize that, Blaise. I'm worried about Mother and Father too, but you can't go back in a blind rage." Amanda's tone was

desperate. "You must come up with a plan."

Blaise pulled his hand from Amanda's grasp and folded his arms across his chest. "All right. I'll plan a way to get on the ranch. If Mother and Father are still alive like Mr. Withers said, they must be somewhere close. Let me think." Blaise paused. "Is there anyone living in the old ranch house?"

"Not that I'm aware of. Since Father had the new house built, no one goes around it. Why?" Amanda looked puzzled.

"Well, that's a start," Blaise mused. "I can go back and live in the old house."

"Pray tell, how will that help?" May asked snidely. "Kincaid will still consider you a threat. After all, I'm sure he knows you are to inherit the ranch."

"I haven't thought that far ahead. I'm sure I can find a legitimate reason for being there." Blaise rubbed his grizzled chin.

Mr. Withers shook his head. "It wouldn't help, Blaise, even if you had a legitimate reason for being on the ranch. You have no legal rights. Have you forgotten the clause in your father's will? You can only inherit the ranch if you're married or over thirty-five years old."

Blaise recalled the day his father jokingly threatened to disinherit him unless he married and continued the family name. "Father wasn't serious about that." Blaise laughed at the memory.

Mr. Withers shook his head. "I'm afraid he was. It's in the will."

Blaise clamped his mouth shut, his mind racing.

"You won't be thirty-five for five more years," Amanda said with a long sigh. "If only you were married . . ."

"How would having a wife help?" Henry asked in bewilderment.

“At least Blaise would have legal rights to the ranch if he were married.” Amanda slumped back into the soft cushion.

Henry poured himself another drink. “Kincaid still won’t give up until Blaise is dead and no longer a threat to him. Whatever you two are hatching, you’d better forget about it.”

Suddenly, an idea hit Blaise. “I’ll get married! I’ll go home, a mere image of a man, only wanting a place for my wife and me to live peacefully. That’s what I’ll tell my future bride, anyway. If I’m legally married, neither the law nor Lance Kincaid can keep me off the Buckshot Ranch.”

“What?” May said with a gasp. “You can’t be serious, Blaise Cameron! Where in the world would you find a wife?”

Blaise jumped up from the settee. “I’ll advertise for one. They still have those mail-order brides in the paper, don’t they?”

“Of course, but you can’t marry a woman without loving her,” May said disparagingly. “It wouldn’t be fair to the young woman.”

“Come on, Aunt May. Most of those women don’t want love. It’s merely a way to nab a rich husband.”

“Really, Blaise, I’m surprised at you. How could you even consider such a ruse?” Amanda challenged. “What would you do with your wife after you were through using her?”

“Don’t fear, Mandy. The twit would be amply rewarded for her services.”

“Honestly, Blaise, you’re a beast! How can you be so cold and calculating? And how do you plan to tell the unfortunate soul your plans for her?”

“That, dear sister, is a trivial matter.” Blaise chuckled, remembering green eyes, long red hair, and a singsong voice.

FOUR



All day, Rosaleen hunted for a job with no luck. She had prayed she would be able to find a job before her father found out she and her mother had lost theirs. But no one wanted to hire a “Paddy.” Oh, how she hated the degrading term Americans used for the Irish.

Now it was late, and Rosaleen needed to return home before her parents started to worry. As she passed the sewing factory, she spied Ward Masters’ carriage at the back of the building. She heard him yelling at someone. Then a woman screamed. The blood froze in Rosaleen’s veins as the sound echoed in the cool evening air. Chills crept down her back. *What should I do, Lord?*

A voice penetrated Rosaleen’s heart, and she recognized the divine guidance of the Holy Spirit. *“Help her.”*

Relying on faith alone, Rosaleen ran to the back of the sewing factory. She crept behind the carriage and listened as she watched the eerie shadows cast against the building. She heard nothing, so she prayed for courage and felt her way past the bushes along the back wall. She crouched behind the shrubbery until her eyes grew accustomed to the darkness.

“Come get this trash and lock her in the shed,” Masters barked.

Then a beam of light came into view.

Half dragging and half carrying a young, partly clad girl, the carriage driver threatened, “Quit your struggling, girl, or I’ll knock you senseless.”

As they came closer to Rosaleen’s hiding place, the light from the driver’s lantern shone on the girl’s terrified face. Rosaleen recognized her from the sewing factory and gasped, then quickly placed her hand over her mouth. The young girl tried to keep up with the man’s quick pace, but she kept stumbling as he dragged her down the path.

Dropping to her knees, Rosaleen crawled behind a pile of wood, praying Masters’ driver wouldn’t see her. *I have to stop him, Father, even if I have to pounce on him and scratch out his eyes. Give me the strength and courage to help this poor lass.*

Rosaleen’s heart beat wildly as she watched the driver approach the shed with the girl.

Desperate to stop the man from locking the girl in the shed, Rosaleen felt the ground for something she could use as a weapon. She found a large rock next to her knee and picked it up with both hands. Then she quietly crept up behind the man. Though she quivered with fright, she managed to raise her arms and slam the rock into the back of his head.

The driver slumped to the ground as though dead, and the frightened girl started to scream.

“Shut up or Ward Masters will hear ye,” Rosaleen whispered in a shrill tone.

The young woman stifled her scream with her hand as she tried to get a better look her rescuer.

Rosaleen stooped over the man’s still form and tried to roll him over. “Don’t just stand there. Help me take his coat off. Ye’ll

freeze in that frock yer wearin'. Ye need his coat to keep warm. We've got to hurry before he wakes and alerts Masters."

Without further explanation, the girl obeyed. After they removed the driver's coat and the girl donned it, Rosaleen ordered her to run.

The girls ran until they were a safe distance from Masters' factory. They were out of breath and unable to speak for a few minutes. Still walking at a hasty pace, the girl spoke first.

"I don't know who you are, but thank you."

"I'm Rosaleen O'Shay. I think I've seen ye at Masters' sewin' factory. Me mother and me worked there."

"Yes, I did work at the factory, but I don't remember you. I wasn't there long enough to make any friends. By the way, my name is Janna Barnes." The girl smiled shyly.

"I do not mean to pry into yer business, and ye do not have to tell me, but what were ye doin' with Masters?" Rosaleen questioned, glancing over her shoulder.

Janna hugged the oversized coat around her thin frame and began to cry. "I was stupid enough to think Masters was in love with me. I didn't find out until it was too late that he wanted me for one of his harlots. When I refused to do his bidding, he beat me and had me locked in the shed."

"Did no one come lookin' for ye?"

Janna brushed the tears from her cheeks. "I don't have anyone who'd miss me. I lost my parents a year ago to cholera, so I came to Pittsburgh looking for work."

Rosaleen wanted to comfort Janna, but didn't know how the girl would react to an embrace from a total stranger. "I'm sorry to hear that. Well, ye can come home with me until ye can find a place of yer own."

"Thank you, but I don't want to burden your family."

"Bah, 'tis no burden. Ye cannot be livin' on the streets. I'll

not take no for an answer.”

“All right. Thank you,” Janna responded quietly. “It would be nice to have a place to stay until I find another job. I have to admit I’m relieved I don’t have to be alone for a few days. I don’t think Ward Masters will take losing me lightly.”

Rosaleen nodded. “By the way, I’m sorry for bein’ sharp with ye back there, but I did not want Masters to catch us.”

“That’s okay. I assumed Masters was playing another one of his dirty games. I thought I’d never get away alive. I’m no use to anyone now. I may as well have stayed with Masters and become what he wanted. He took the only thing I had to offer a man.”

“I’ll not be listenin’ to such foolish talk. He may have violated yer body, but yer heart ’tis the same. Ye’ll find a good man when yer ready.”

“I hope you’re right, but I’ll not count on it,” Janna replied dejectedly.

“Yer still a wee lass. It’ll be many years before ye’ll be thinkin’ of marryin’.”

“I’m twenty years old.”

“Ye be twenty? I thought ye were much younger. I’m twenty-two. In Ireland women do not marry until they’re about thirty, and men about thirty-five.”

The brightness of the moon illuminated Janna’s startled expression. “Why so old? By then your life is half over.”

Rosaleen shrugged. “Ireland is a poor country. A woman must have a dowry to give her husband, and that takes years of savin’.”

“Ireland sounds a lot different.”

“That it is, but one thin’ is the same. No jobs for the Irish.”

Maureen O'Shay stared out the window, watching the sun go down. Despite the beautiful day, the evening had turned cool. Except for a few crickets and muffled voices from the nearby cabins, the night was quiet and still.

Rosaleen, Maureen's eldest daughter, had left several hours before, leaving a note saying she was going into town. What could she be doing out so late? It didn't feel right to Maureen, and she feared Ward Masters might have something to do with it.

Patrick looked over the top of his paper. "Would ye stop pacin', Maureen? Yer makin' me nervous. Rosaleen will be home soon. She probably got detained visitin' one of her friends."

"I hope yer right, love. If she isn't home soon, I be sendin' Shawn to look for her."

"All right, then please sit down. I want to read this advertisement to ye."

WANTED: MAIL-ORDER BRIDE TO LIVE ON A SMALL FARM IN CALIFORNIA. MUST BE AT LEAST TWENTY-ONE YEARS OF AGE.

"Aye, I've read those mail-order bride ads before. They print them once a week," Maureen said, her thoughts still on Rosaleen.

"Why would anyone want to marry a stranger?" Shannon wondered.

"I sure wouldn't marry a person I did not know." Maureen shook her head. "A man would have to be pretty desperate to advertise for a bride."

"Aye," said Patrick, "but 'twould be a grand opportunity for any young lass who wanted to live in California."

"Aye, Da. Maybe Rosaleen should answer the ad for a husband," Shannon said with a giggle. "Her bein' an old maid by

America's standards, and, with her hot temper, she's never goin' ta find a husband on her own."

Joining in on the laughter, Maureen said, "Ye may be right, Shannon lass."

Rosaleen hadn't done such a good job on her own when it came to men. All of the Irish lads were afraid of her temper. They didn't want to tame such a wild *cailin*.

"Are ye jestin'? Rosaleen would never consent to an arranged marriage to a stranger or any other man," Shawn said. "She does not want any man orderin' her about."

Patrick wagged his finger at his son, trying to balance the paper with his other hand. "She is too high spirited for her own good. She needs a nice lad to settle her down."

"Aye, Patrick, yer right, but ye know how stubborn yer daughter is," Maureen answered as she picked up her darning and eased her tired body onto the wooden rocking chair.

"That I do, me dear," Patrick said with a hint of laughter in his voice. "'Tis a shame, though. If Rosaleen would at least *pretend* to get along with the young lads, she might find one she'd be happy with."

The room fell silent. Shannon finally went to bed and the men left to find Rosaleen. Maureen prayed her rebellious daughter was safe.

* * * * *

Maureen sprung from her chair and ran toward the open door. "Rosaleen Katherine, where have ye been? I've been out of me mind with worry!"

Rosaleen hugged her mother. "I'm sorry, Mama, 'tis late I know. I've walked so much today, I think I wore me shoes out. I did not mean for ye to worry so."

"Ye know I'd be worried when it became dark and ye were not home. That 'tis very irresponsible of ye, daughter." Maureen took a deep breath. "But praise the Lord ye are safe." Then she saw a young woman concealed behind Rosaleen, and she looked to her daughter for an explanation.

"Mama, this be Janna Barnes." Rosaleen smiled at Janna as she gently coaxed her new friend out from behind her. "'Tis okay, lass, do not be frightened. 'Tis only me mama, and her bark is much worse than her bite."

Rosaleen turned back to her mother. "May Janna spend the night? She's done in and needs to get some sleep. We'd like to explain in the morn what happened, if 'tis agreeable with ye."

Maureen looked from Rosaleen to Janna. She was curious about the young lass, but Rosaleen was right, Janna did look exhausted. "Aye, daughter, off with ye before yer da and Shawn return. They've been out lookin' for ye. Yer friend may stay, but mind ye, I be wantin' an explanation in the morn." Smiling at Janna, she added, "Ye are welcome to our home, Janna. Pleasant dreams to ye."

Janna smiled shyly at Maureen. "Thank you, Mrs. O'Shay."

Rosaleen hugged her mother good night and then motioned Janna to follow her. She quietly closed the curtains that separated the makeshift bedroom from the rest of the cabin. She went to the wardrobe and found two nightgowns. Once the girls were ready to retire, Rosaleen gently moved the sleeping Shannon to the middle of the bed and motioned Janna to take the other side. Rosaleen said her prayers and then slipped between the sheets. Within minutes, both young women were fast asleep.

Maureen stirred the steaming cereal in the pot. She heard the

girls talking behind the curtain and decided to set the table for breakfast. Fortunately, the girls had waited until the menfolk had left for work before rising; the less Patrick knew what was going on the better. When Rosaleen drew back the curtain, Maureen smiled warmly at Janna. "Good morn, Janna. Did ye sleep well?"

"Yes, thank you." Janna smiled. "I think I scared your little daughter Shannon, though. I'm sure she's not accustomed to finding a stranger in her bed when she wakes."

Maureen laughed and then kissed her daughters good morning. She spooned the stir-about into the bowls and asked Rosaleen to cut the bread. Then Shannon blessed the meal.

"I hope ye like stir-about, Janna." Rosaleen passed the cream to her friend.

"I've never had it before, but it smells delicious." Janna poured a bit of cream on her hot cereal and passed the cream on to Shannon. Rosaleen offered her a slice of bread. Janna thanked her, accepted the bread, and took a bite. "Mmm, this is good. I've never eaten bread like this before."

"'Tis called Irish soda bread," Maureen explained. "'Tis made with soda instead of yeast, which ye are probably not used to. We add currants or raisins to it back in the old country."

"This is the best meal I've had in a long time," Janna said.

After she watched the young girl scrape her bowl of every drop of cereal, Maureen gave Rosaleen a puzzled look. She was about to ask for the promised explanation when Rosaleen frowned at her, shaking her head and glancing at her little sister. Whatever was wrong, Rosaleen obviously didn't want Shannon to hear it.

Rosaleen popped the last bite of bread into her mouth. "Shannon, what are ye about today?"

"I do not know. Ask Mama," Shannon answered between mouthfuls of cereal. "I usually do the dishes and clean the cabin. With ye and Mama home, perhaps I may visit some friends

today.” Shannon gave her mother one of her angelic smiles.

Now certain, Maureen looked at Shannon. “Aye, lass, ye can go play after breakfast. I be givin’ ye a bit of a holiday until I go back to work. ’Tis nice to cook the meals for me family for a change.”

“Thank ye, Mama,” Shannon said excitedly. She ate the last of her stir-about and left quickly.

By late afternoon, the cabin was clean and tidy and the laundry washed and dried. Maureen poured herself a cup of herbal tea and sat down at the table. “Okay, lass, out with it. I know somethin’ happened yesterday, and I be wantin’ to know now.”

Rosaleen and Janna sat down at the table. After taking a deep breath, Rosaleen explained what had happened behind the sewing factory.

Maureen listened in horror. Both girls could have been taken or worse. She wanted to reprimand her daughter, but at the detached look on Janna’s face, she was afraid the poor girl would take her meaning wrong. She thought for a minute, praying silently for guidance, then said, “I’m pleased ye helped Janna, but ye took a great chance. Ye know how dangerous Ward Masters is. I want ye to promise me ye will not be goin’ near the sewin’ factory again.”

Then Maureen looked at Janna and smiled. “I be happy ye are safe and away from that horrid man, lass. Ye are welcome here until ye can find a place to live.”

“That’s very kind of you, Mrs. O’Shay, but I don’t have anywhere to go and no money to rent a room. I think it would be best if I just left. I don’t want to be a burden.”

Janna rose to leave but Maureen stopped her. “Ye do not have to leave. Ye cannot live in the streets.”

Janna shook her head, tears clearly threatening. “I’ll find some place to go. You and your family are having a hard enough

time without feeding another person.”

“Aye, we may be havin’ a hard time keepin’ body and soul together, but not bad enough that we’ll put ye on the streets to beg for food. Besides,” Maureen said with a smile, “I may know of a place ye can stay. Ye would have to work for yer board and room.”

Janna’s face brightened. “I don’t mind working hard. I’m used to it.”

Maureen laughed at Janna’s eagerness. “Our good comrades, the McNallys, are gettin’ along in years. I’m sure they’d welcome yer help.”

“That sounds wonderful, Mrs. O’Shay. When can I speak with them?”

“I’ll send Shannon over later to ask them to come over tonight.”

“I’m sure ye’ll like the McNallys,” Rosaleen said. “They’re nice folk and ye would be close enough to visit.”

“I would like that.” Now, tears ran down Janna’s face.

Maureen patted her hand. “There, there, lass, do not fret. We’ll be here whenever ye need us.”

“Thank you,” Janna said hoarsely, drying her tears with the back of her hand. “Ever since my parents died, I’ve been so alone.”

“Well, yer not alone anymore.” Questions ran through Maureen’s mind, but she didn’t want to push the poor girl.

“I think yer needin’ a bath before the menfolk come home from work,” Maureen said, pulling up her sleeves.

Rosaleen helped with Janna’s bath water and Maureen offered to take her coat. “’Tis an odd coat for such a wee lass,” she said with a chuckle.

“It belonged to Ward Masters’ driver. Rosaleen had me put it on since my dress is nothing but a rag.” Janna shivered as she

clung to the coat.

When Janna removed the overcoat, Maureen saw her disheveled condition and cried out in alarm. "*Mavrone!* What happened to ye?"

Obviously embarrassed by her shabby appearance, Janna hung her head. Her only frock, torn and filthy, hung limply on her thin frame. Her bruised and battered body showed the abuse she had suffered at Ward Masters' hands. Janna tried to cover her body with her arms. "I'm fine, really."

Maureen watched as Janna averted her eyes. "Yer not fine! Did Masters do this to ye?"

"Y—yes," Janna stammered through broken sobs. "I didn't want to be one of his prostitutes, so he beat and defiled me."

She stepped away from Maureen and Rosaleen. "Now you know the truth!" she cried. "I'm unclean, filthy! I should return to the streets where I belong. I'm not decent enough to be with people like you. I feel like the cheap harlot Masters wants me to be." Falling to her knees, Janna placed her hands over her face and wept bitterly.

Maureen quickly knelt beside Janna and then glanced up at Rosaleen's ashen face. Tears slipped onto her daughter's cheeks as Janna sobbed.

Maureen cradled Janna in her arms as she would her own daughter. She silently prayed God would inspire her to say the right words to comfort the young woman. "Do not blame yerself, lass. "'Tis not yer fault. Yer the same person ye was before, are ye not?"

"I—I don't know anymore. My life is ruined." The girl sounded like she would choke on her own tears.

"Ye are havin' a bit of bad luck but 'twill pass," Maureen said carefully. "Ye'll see. Ye cannot go through life with a guilty heart. 'Tis Masters' shame, not yers. Ye must forget what happened. We'll be here to help ye and so will God. He'll never

forsake ye, lassie.”

“God can’t love me. I’ve sinned beyond His forgiveness.”

“Nay, lass, yer never beyond God’s forgiveness. What happened to ye was not yer doin’. More than anyone, God knows that.”

“But will other people forgive me? Will a man ever want me to be the mother of his children? Will a man ever be able to look at me and not see what happened?” Janna’s voice was full of despair.

“The right man will.”

Maureen asked Rosaleen to bring her the Bible. She flipped through the pages and then read aloud, “For nothin’ is impossible with God.” Closing the book, she smiled warmly and said, “If ye have faith in God, anythin’ is possible.”

Maureen watched as a meek smile formed on Janna’s lips. *Oh, the poor little lassie. Lord, how she must miss her parents. Her soul must crave for love and compassion.* Maureen felt Janna’s arms cling tightly to her and vowed to do anything she could to help her.

Janna extended an arm to Rosaleen. “How blessed you are, Rosaleen, to have such a gentle and loving mother.” Then, looking at Maureen with tears streaming down her cheeks, she pleaded, “Please help me, Mrs. O’Shay. I don’t know what to do.”

Maureen kissed Janna’s wet cheek. “Let’s say a wee prayer to the Lord. That always comforts me when I’m troubled and confused.”

Janna sniffed and then wiped the tears away. “Would you say it?”

“Aye, lass, I’d be proud to.” Maureen folded her arms and lowered her head.

“Dear Father, who art in heaven, please hear our humble prayer. We thank Thee, dear Lord, for bringin’ Janna into our

midst, so that we may be able to help her in her hour of need. We are so grateful to Thee, Lord, for keepin' her safe and helpin' her to be strong durin' her terrible ordeal.

"We pray that Thou wilt comfort her and tell her sweet spirit that Ye love her and that Ye hold no malice toward her for what Ward Masters did to her. Please help her heal in her mind as well as her body. Please use us as yer instruments in helpin' her. We also pray that she can find a new, happy life and a lovin' man to care for her.

"We ask that Thy will be done with Ward Masters and pray that he will not harm any more innocent women. We ask these thin's humbly, Lord. Amen."

After the prayer, the three women sat on the floor, hugging each other and crying. "Come on, ye two. Stop puddlin' up," Maureen finally said as she dabbed her own eyes.

Rosaleen brushed the tears from her cheeks. "Yer bath water is ready, Janna."

Maureen looked at the clock. "Oh, my! I had no idea it was so late. We've been talkin' longer than I thought. I need to be gettin' supper on before the menfolk arrive."

* * * * *

While Janna took her bath, she listened to Rosaleen helping her mother prepare supper. It was a nice sound, mother and daughter chatting and enjoying each other's company. Shannon returned home, then left on an errand to invite the McNallys over after supper.

From the tub, Janna spied the simple, blue calico dress Rosaleen had placed on the bed for her to wear, along with a clean petticoat, chemise, and pantaloons. Janna smiled at Rosaleen's family's kindness and prayed she could repay it someday.

Janna stood in front of the small mirror. Her long hair, still damp from washing, now shone a golden blonde. Her hazel eyes and pink cheeks glowed with happiness. For the first time since her parents died, she felt hope. It was hard to hold back the tears of joy as she opened the curtain that separated the girls' bedchamber from the rest of the cabin.

"Oh, Janna, yer beautiful!" Rosaleen exclaimed.

"Ye look very pretty, Janna." Then Maureen chuckled. "Ye'd best be watchin' Shawn."

"Who is Shawn?"

"He be me son. He knows a pretty cailin when he sees one."

With a timid smile, Janna asked if they needed help with supper.

"Nay, lassie, everythin' 'tis ready," Maureen said. "And just in time, too, for here comes Shannon and the menfolk."

Janna's face paled. "Please, Mrs. O'Shay. Don't tell them what happened to me. I couldn't bear them knowing."

Maureen gave Janna a brief hug. "Nay, lass, I'll not be tellin' the menfolk anythin'. Yer a friend of Rosaleen's who's in need. That's all they need to be knowin'." She turned to Rosaleen. "Remember, Rosaleen Katherine, I'll tell yer da we lost our jobs when the time is right."

* * * * *

Rosaleen nodded to her mother, relieved she didn't have to break the bad news herself. She glanced at Janna's ashen face and patted her friend on the shoulder, then opened the door.

With a bright smile, Rosaleen greeted her father and brother. "Good eve, Da and Shawn. Ye look weary tonight."

"Aye, darlin', that we be," Patrick said. "Ye gave us quite a start last night, lass, and ye had yer poor mama worried half

to death.”

Before Rosaleen had a chance to reply, Maureen interjected, “I already chastised her, Patrick.” Then she quickly changed the subject. “We have a guest for dinner tonight.”

Rosaleen noticed how her brother kept staring at their new friend. She stifled a giggle. “Da and Shawn, this be Janna Barnes. She worked at the sewin’ factory.”

Patrick stepped forward. “’Tis nice to meet ye. I’d shake yer hand, but as ye can see, I’m a bit dirty.” He laughed. “Welcome to our humble home.”

Shawn quickly wiped his hand on his pants leg and offered his hand to Janna. “’Tis me pleasure.”

Janna reddened as she accepted his hand.

Maureen kissed her husband. “Janna is needin’ a place to stay. I be thinkin’ the McNallys might take her in, so I invited them over after supper.”

“*Deas fionn* cailin,” Shawn said with a sigh as he stared at Janna.

Seeing the perplexed look on Janna’s face, Shannon laughed. “Shawn said yer a pretty, fair-haired lass.”

Janna lowered her eyes and blushed.

Shawn let out a low growl. “Shannon, ye got a loose tongue!”

“*Arrah!* She be tellin’ the truth. ’Tis what ye said.” Rosaleen lifted her eyebrows as she looked at her brother.

“Now, ye cailins stop embarrassin’ yer brother,” Maureen ordered.

With a grateful smile at his mother, Shawn went to join his father to wash for dinner.

After the family finished their meal, they sat around the hearth and discussed the day’s events.

Patrick reclined back on the bed that also served as a sofa in

the small cabin. "We nearly had a cave-in today."

"Mavrone! What happened, Patrick?" Maureen exclaimed.

"'Twas a close one this time, *mavourneen*. The old timbers in the minin' shaft just could not hold any longer. 'Twas a miracle no one was injured."

"Is the company goin' to get new timbers?"

"Nay, me darlin'. The company 'tis too tightfisted to buy new materials," Patrick replied scornfully.

"Aye, that's the truth, Mama. They'd rather lose a crew of men than spend money on materials or safety guards." Their son shook his head.

Rosaleen sat on the edge of the bed next to her father. "I wish ye did not have to work in the mines, Da."

"So do I, Rosaleen, lass, but 'tis the only job there is for us to do."

"Aye, Da, I know, but 'tis a dangerous job."

"That it be, that it be. I be wishin' we had a farm with flocks of sheep, but, alas, 'tis not in the Lord's plan yet. When it is, we'll have it."

"Aye, in California." Shawn smiled. "I've heard the land is rich and just for the takin'."

"My parents dreamed of California also," Janna said.

Shawn focused his attention on Janna. "Yer da was a farmer?"

"Yes. All Papa knew was farming. We were going to sell our farm here, but my parents died before they had a chance."

"'Tis a sad thin', to be sure." Maureen gave Janna a compassionate look. "Do ye still have yer parents' land?"

Janna sighed. "No. I couldn't make the mortgage payments, so it was auctioned off."

"'Tis a sad story. Too sad to be rememberin' now."

"You're right, Mrs. O'Shay. I have a new future ahead of me."

I have to remember that.” She glanced at Shawn as she brushed away a tear.

A loud knock broke the silence. Maureen answered the door and invited the McNallys in. “*Cead mile failte*, Kathleen and Michael,” she greeted in the Irish and then hugged her dear friend.

“May all be blessed in this house,” the McNallys returned.

The two older couples sat around the kitchen table, drinking herbal tea and chatting. Shannon curled up on her father’s lap, resting her head on his shoulder. Rosaleen sat and listened to her parents talk and laugh about the old days. Shawn and Janna visited quietly by the fire. If only this moment could last forever, Rosaleen thought. It had been a long time since her kin had an enjoyable time with friends.

“Have ye heard the news?” Rosaleen heard Mr. McNally ask.

“Nay, we heard no news,” Maureen said.

“Ye haven’t heard what yer comrades are plannin’ to do? There’s nothin’ but talk of goin’ to California.”

The O’Shay clan stared at Michael McNally in disbelief until Patrick said, “California?”

“Aye, California. Many of our Irish comrades are tired of puttin’ off their dreams of farmin’. They’re goin’ to sell everythin’ they own and leave as soon as they can.” Michael’s enthusiasm seemed contagious. “The missus and I will be goin’ with them.”

The O’Shays stared at each other in silence.

“I be happy for ye,” Patrick finally said. “I only wish we were goin’ with ye.”

“Why can ye not come, Patrick?” Michael asked. “Everyone be knowin’ how ye want to farm again. Yer not goin’ to last much longer workin’ in the coal mines. Yer health ’tis not the same.”

“Aye, but we do not have the money to be goin’ west, and we have little to sell. Payin’ back the money for our trip to America

took all we could earn. The debt is paid now, but our savin's are small yet."

Mr. McNally shook his head forlornly. 'Tis a shame, Patrick. We all be wishin' yer clan could join us."

Patrick slapped Michael McNally on the shoulder. "'Tis our dream to farm in California. Maybe next year."

Maureen refilled the cups with tea. "How are ye plannin' to go, Michael?"

"By wagon train. Everyone 'tis helpin' to pay for a wagon master to guide us."

"A wagon train?" Rosaleen raised her eyebrows. "How many families will be goin'?"

"'Tis hard to say, lassie. Nigh on the entire congregation is sayin' they're goin'. A wagon train is the only way ye can get from here to California right now. The train stopped layin' tracks because of the war. I guess ye could go by stagecoach or by sea, but a wagon train is the cheapest way to go."

Shannon turned her head toward her father. "Can we go, Da?"

"Nay, me darlin', we cannot. We would have to buy provisions to last the journey, plus the wagon and gear. 'Tis too much."

"How much would it take, Da?" Rosaleen inquired.

After a pause, Patrick answered, "It would take about a thousand dollars."

Rosaleen slumped back into her chair and glanced around the room at the disappointed faces. *There has to be a way, Lord, for us to go to California.*

"Well, the hour is late. We best be goin' home." Kathleen McNally sighed as she rose from the table. "We'll be missin' ye all. She brushed a tear from her eye.

"Aye, and we'll miss ye as well." Maureen hugged her dear friend. "We came all the way together from Limerick, Eire.

Unfortunately, 'tis time we part."

As the McNallys were about to leave, Maureen grabbed Kathleen by the arm. "I almost forgot to mention the favor I wanted to ask ye."

Motioning Janna to her side, Maureen explained the girl's plight to the McNallys. "We would love to have her live here but we have no room. She would be a helpmate to ye, Kathleen. She would work hard, I'm thinkin'."

"I would enjoy havin' the company of the lass, and I do need some help." Kathleen turned to Janna. "Ye be knowin' we are goin' to California. Would ye be wantin' to go with us?"

"To tell you the truth, Mrs. McNally, I'm not sure right now. Can I think it over?"

"Of course, ye can. Yer still welcome to come home with us. I could use yer help preparin' for the journey."

"Thank you. That's very kind of you."

After Janna left with the McNallys, the O'Shays fell into a gloomy mood. All of their hopes and dreams were fading.

Maureen looked at the clock above the hearth. It was time for bed. Shawn and Shannon played cards on the hearth, while Rosaleen sat quietly on the floor next to Maureen's chair. Maureen knew what troubled her eldest daughter, and it distressed her as well. The news of their quitting the sewing factory would only worsen Patrick's mood. With a defeated sigh, Maureen put down her darning. "I be havin' more bad news to tell ye, Patrick."

"What bad news?" He glanced up from the newspaper.

"I wanted to tell ye earlier, but couldn't with the McNallys here."

“What ye prattlin’ about, woman?”

“I be tryin’ to tell ye. Rosaleen and I lost our jobs.”

Rosaleen grabbed her mother’s hand as the small cabin went quiet again.

Patrick dropped the paper and it floated to the floor in a heap. “What do ye mean, ye lost yer jobs?”

“Now do not be hollerin’ at me, Patrick Shawn O’Shay! We had a bit of trouble with Mr. Masters. He gave Rosaleen an alternative—to be one of his harlots or he’d fire us. Me daughter is no man’s harlot, so we quit.”

Patrick’s face turned pale. “I’ll fight the bloody mongrel for treatin’ me daughter so!”

Rosaleen quickly stood and rushed to her father’s side. “Nay, Da. I’ll not be havin’ me father fightin’ the likes of Ward Masters. Ye’ll be the one goin’ to jail, not him. Then what will we do?”

In two short strides, Shawn was beside his father. “Rosaleen is right, Da. I’ll beat Masters bloody raw, the cur. Me comrades and I could do it without him knowin’ it was us.” He threw the cards on the earthen floor.

“Neither of ye will be doin’ any fightin’. We’ll just let it drop. ’Tis for the best.” Maureen boldly faced her husband and son. “We’ll get by somehow.”

Rosaleen grabbed her father’s hand. “I’ll find another job, Da, I promise.”

“’Tis not the job, Rosaleen Katherine,” he said. “’Tis for yer honor.”

Rosaleen grasped her father’s hands. “Ye cannot fight, Da. ’Tis not worth it. Ye have to think of yer family here without ye if ye were to go to jail. Ward Masters would win then. Can ye not see me meanin’? That goes for ye too, Shawn.”

A long silence filled the small cabin.

“Aye, yer right, lass, but I’ll not be forgettin’ what happened.”

Patrick ran both hands through his short hair in frustration.

"Nor I," Shawn declared.

"Well, I'm relieved 'tis settled." Maureen scowled at the two men. "We best be gettin' to bed. I want to get up early in the morn and see if I can find me a job."

Shannon, who had kept silent through the entire scene, ran to her mother's side. "Mama, do ye have to go to work so soon? I do not want ye to. Please stay home with me."

Maureen kissed her youngest child on the cheek and then gently stroked her hair. "Nay, lass, I have to find work. 'Tis even more important now. I'll be home early, I promise."

"I'd like to go with ye, Mama. Maybe I can find work also," Rosaleen offered.

"Nay, lass, not tomorrow."

Rosaleen sighed. It was futile to argue with an O'Shay.

Everyone headed to bed except Shawn, who said he wanted to walk and think. Rosaleen felt certain his walk would take him to the McNallys.

With the events of the day, sleep evaded Rosaleen. She thought she'd feel better after saying her prayers, but she couldn't stop worrying.

A faint noise shook Rosaleen from her thoughts, and she rolled over in bed to find Shannon crying. Snuggling closer to her little sister, Rosaleen asked if she'd a bad dream.

"Nay," Shannon said softly. "I'm frightened at what is goin' to happen to us. What if ye and Mama cannot find new jobs? We're almost out of food. I don't even know what to make for breakfast tomorrow morn."

Rosaleen pulled her sister into her arms. "Do not worry about breakfast. I'll find somethin' to make. Besides, Shawn and Da will soon be gettin' wages from the mine, so do not worry about adult business. Ye have been workin' too hard lately. I think it

would be nice if ye went visitin' yer friends tomorrow. Most of them will be leavin' soon."

Shannon sniffed and then wiped her nose with the back of her hand. "I know. That's been botherin' me too. I was hopin' we could go to California with everyone else. I hate livin' here. I'm frightened Mama and Da are goin' to die. They work so hard." Now Shannon sobbed. "I do not want them to die!"

Rosaleen held her sister's small, quaking body. She would do anything to quiet her sister's fears and help her parents leave this pesthole. What could she do? Rosaleen prayed for a miracle before falling into a restless slumber.

FIVE



The following morning, Rosaleen found very little food in the cupboards, but there was salt, baking powder, lard, and enough flour to make pancakes. After preparing breakfast, she quietly woke her father and Shawn. She had heard her mother return from job searching and decided to let her and Shannon sleep.

Rosaleen wrapped two sandwiches and placed them in a lard bucket. "The only thin' I have for your lunch is a mutton sandwich."

Patrick took a seat at the table. "'Tis fine, darlin'. Just make sure there's enough for dinner tonight. 'Twill be a wee tight for a while. Yer mother found a job this morn. She starts waitin' tables tonight."

Rosaleen's hopes soared. "Did she get a job for me too, Da?"

"I do not know. Ye'll have to ask yer mother when she wakes."

Rosaleen stood before her father with her head down as she absently picked at the lint on her frock. "I'm sorry, Da, for causin' more burdens for ye and Mama."

Patrick clasped his daughter's hand. "'Tis not yer fault. We'll get by somehow. The Lord always blesses us—ye'll see. We might have to spend our savin's, though I hate to, for then we'll never get to California."

"I'll get another job, Da, I promise," Rosaleen said earnestly.

"All I can ask is for ye to try, lass." Patrick rose from the table. "Come and give yer da a kiss."

Rosaleen placed a kiss on his weathered cheek. "I love ye, Da."

"I love ye too, lassie."

After Shawn and her father left for the coal mine, Rosaleen quietly tidied the small cabin and rekindled the fire. Soon, she began to pace the floor. She hated to disturb her mother's slumber, but finally, at eight o'clock, she decided to wake her.

"Mama," she whispered softly, "I hate to bother ye when yer sleepin', but did I get a job at the inn too?"

Through half-closed eyes, Maureen mumbled, "Nay, Rosaleen. They be needin' no more help."

Rosaleen watched as her mother drifted back to sleep. Then she sat next to the hearth and stared into the fire, wondering what to do. Finally, after scribbling a note to her mother, Rosaleen donned her shawl and bonnet and left the cabin.

The morning air was still cool as Rosaleen started for town, but the warm sun felt exhilarating on her face. Soon, flowers would start to bloom and spring planting would begin. How she wished she and her family were on a farm, with rich earth to work as God intended. There had to be a way for her family to go to California.

Suddenly, Rosaleen heard someone call her name. She turned and saw Janna running toward her.

"I was just going to your house," Janna said breathlessly.

"I'm glad I caught you."

"I thought ye were to help Mrs. McNally today."

"I've been doing that since before dawn." Janna laughed. "They're very nice people, but I decided not go to California with them, and they said they understood. So I thought I better find a job."

Rosaleen gasped. "Yer not goin' with them? Why not, for pity sake?"

"I prayed about it, and I felt it would be better if I stayed. Besides, I don't want to leave you and your kin. You've become like family to me."

Rosaleen linked her arm with Janna's. "That is sweet of ye. We're all fond of ye, too, but please do not stay because of us."

"But I want to stay. There's nothing in California for me."

"'Tis yer decision to do as ye please. I suppose we best be findin' jobs, then. Besides, Shawn will be happy to hear yer stayin'. I think he's sweet on ye." Rosaleen giggled.

"What makes you think that?"

Rosaleen watched as Janna blushed a crimson hue. "Oh, a sister knows these thin's." If Rosaleen had her way, her brother was about to find himself in love.

As Janna started across the street, Rosaleen grabbed her arm and yanked her back onto the boardwalk. Rosaleen stopped at the end of the wooden plank, toes teetering over the edge. She cautiously looked both ways and took a deep breath. Then she noticed the bewildered look on Janna's face.

"What, pray tell, is the matter with you, Rosaleen?"

Rosaleen knew she must look terribly foolish, but she straightened her back, linked her arms with Janna's, and headed across the now-vacant street.

"I was almost run over by an *ababack* jackeen!"

When Janna didn't respond, Rosaleen remembered her friend

didn't speak Gaelic. "A filthy knave almost ran me over with his horse as I was crossin' the street, and I'm not givin' him any more chances. I'm sure he's some sort of lunatic. A lady isn't safe to walk the streets anymore."

A smile played on Janna's lips. "And was this dirty blackguard handsome, Rosaleen?"

"Handsome?" Rosaleen shrieked, stopping midway across the dusty street. "Ye must be daft, Janna, to think I'd be lookin' at a man such as he." With her hand on her hip, Rosaleen waved her other arm in the air like a sword. "Why, he probably has a poor wife and half a dozen children pinin' away for him and he's here flirtin' with every woman he sees."

Janna laughed. "If you're so worried he's going to run over you again, then why are we standing in the middle of the street? I mean, aren't we a little bit conspicuous?"

Rosaleen ignored the jab, took Janna's arm, and marched her across the street.

Blaise stood outside his attorney's office, watching the Irish lass—the one he had almost run over on his horse—pull a girl across the street by her arm. A smile crept across his face as he envisioned himself walking up to the fiery redhead and giving her another wink. He just might look for her, he thought, when he finished his business with Mr. Withers.

So far, returning from the war hadn't been what he expected. As soon as he found a willing bride, he'd head for California and, with any luck, find his parents. His stomach clenched with fear for them, but anger quickly took its place.

He did not want a wife but he knew he must marry, and it went against his nature to have someone dictate to him. In order

to confront Kincaid while ensuring his parents' well-being, he had to play a silly game of intrigue. Everything seemed out of his control.

If there was a God, as Mandy insisted, why was this happening to his family? Why would a merciful God forsake them? Blaise would not pray or believe in such a God.

* * * * *

Rosaleen and Janna pooled their coins and bought a newspaper. Several job openings were listed, but by the time the girls arrived, the positions were no longer available. Unwilling to give up, they continued down the boardwalk.

"Look, Rosaleen, a dressmaker's shop. Maybe they need help."

"It wouldn't hurt to ask."

When they entered the shop, the proprietor smiled from behind the counter. "May I help you two young ladies?"

Rosaleen stepped up to the counter with Janna close behind.

"Aye, we be lookin' for work. Perhaps ye be needin' help to make yer fine dresses. Me friend and me are quick learners. We worked at Masters Sewin' Factory, makin' fine uniforms for our brave men."

The woman's smile vanished and her face turned red. "I don't hire Irish! Get out, you filthy Paddy!"

Taken by surprise, Rosaleen jumped back, stepping on Janna's foot. "Me friend isn't Irish. Surely ye will hire her."

The proprietor grabbed a broom and headed for Rosaleen and Janna. "I don't hire Irish or their friends! Get out before I beat you with this broom!"

The rotund, middle-aged woman whipped the broom in the air and hurried out from behind the counter.

Rosaleen stood her ground, shouting back insults in Gaelic. Janna grabbed Rosaleen by the arm and dragged her from the shop. Rosaleen still shouted as Janna urged her down the boardwalk.

“My goodness, Rosaleen, you have a vile temper.”

Rosaleen stopped and kicked a post. “Aye, I know I do. ’Tis the curse of the Irish, I be thinkin’.” She wagged her finger at Janna. “She had it comin’, treatin’ us that way! You’d think we were hideous beasts from the moon.”

Janna bit her lip. “And didn’t you give her cause to think so! Why, you went wild in there.”

Rosaleen folded her arms over her chest. “Well, I guess I did get a wee bit upset. I’m sick of Americans treatin’ me like I have some kind of disease. I mean, we Irish may as well have stayed in Ireland and let the English degrade us.”

“Come on,” Janna said. “We have better things to do than let a bigot ruin our day.”

Before the girls had taken ten steps down the street, Rosaleen stopped suddenly and pointed. “Look. That place needs help.”

Janna cried out in dismay. “That’s a saloon, Rosaleen. We can’t work there!”

“Aye, ’tis a pub, but ’tis a job nonetheless.” Rosaleen laughed at Janna’s shocked expression. “Come on. Let’s go ask for a job.”

Rosaleen glanced up just as a horse reared in front of her. She bolted backward with a shout, then looked up at the rider. To her horror, it was the straggly Yank who had almost run her down just a few days before.

“Do you always do that or is it just me you can’t resist, beautiful?”

“And ye, sir, why did ye not take a bath and shave that hideous hair off yer face?”

“Another insult.” He smiled down at her. “If a kiss isn’t what

you want, perhaps I can buy you a drink.”

“How dare ye, Yank? Me da would have yer hide if he heard such a request. I’m a Christian, not one of the bawdy girls yer accustomed to. Come down from yer horse and I’ll slap that smirk from yer face!”

The man chuckled. “If I come down from this horse I may have to take you over my knee like a spoiled child.”

Before Rosaleen could comment, he turned his horse and disappeared in the crowd. Rosaleen balled her hands into tight fists and stomped her foot with agitation. Billows of dust rose up from the street.

“Is that the handsome soldier you were telling me about, Rosaleen?” Janna wondered. “I wouldn’t mess with him if I were you. I think he means business.”

“I’m not afraid of the likes of him,” Rosaleen replied. Then she grabbed Janna by the hand and led her into the saloon, opening the swinging doors with defiance. She glanced around at the interior of the shabby pub. Sawdust covered filthy floors, and the place smelled of vomit. Small, round, wooden tables had been placed randomly around the room. Dance hall girls in revealing costumes flaunted their wares on a crude, makeshift stage, while barmaids in scanty attire mingled with the male customers.

The piano was almost inaudible over the shouts and loud laughter of the men who filled every nook and cranny of the puny saloon.

Rosaleen looked around the room for someone who resembled authority, but her attention was drawn to a framed painting of a woman with barely a stitch on her curvaceous body.

“Oh, Rosaleen, we must leave at once!” Janna sounded horrified. “We can’t work in this wicked place.”

“Hush, Janna, someone may hear ye,” Rosaleen scolded. “We have to have a job, don’t we? Well, this is all there is until we find

somethin' more suitable."

"But, Rosaleen, surely your parents wouldn't expect you to work in a place like this."

"Of course not, but I've got to do somethin' to help them."

Rosaleen led Janna through the maze of tables to the back of the saloon, ignoring the crude remarks from the customers. When the two girls finally reached the bar, Rosaleen heaved a sigh of relief and Janna grabbed the bar for support.

Behind the bar stood a tall, balding man talking with one of the barmaids as she waited for him to refill mugs of beer.

"Excuse me, sir. We'd like to speak with the proprietor, if we may," Rosaleen shouted above the racket.

The bartender glanced at Rosaleen and Janna, his brows raised in surprise. "You girls must be lost. This is a saloon, not a church social." He nudged the barmaid and winked.

"Maybe they're looking for their husbands," the barmaid answered with a pelt of laughter.

Rosaleen glared into the painted face. "Nay, miss, we aren't lookin' for our husbands. We came to inquire about the Help Wanted sign in the window."

The bartender laughed and patted the barmaid on the shoulder. "Did you hear that, Mabel? They want a job."

"I find nothin' amusin', sir," Rosaleen said dryly, nearly losing her patience.

"Neither of you look like barmaids to me." The man squinted at them. "Why would you want to work here?"

"We've been lookin' all day for a job and this was our last resort," Janna explained.

The bartender's expression softened. "Yeah, I believe that. Since the war ended you can't even buy a job."

"Well, do we get the jobs?" Rosaleen asked bluntly.

"Oh, all right. I'll try you for one night, but I warn you, it ain't

gonna be easy. These men in here can get rough, so figure yourself warned. I don't wanna hear any complaining or sniveling. If you can't take it, out you go. I ain't gonna lose any costumers over two green barmaids. I'm having a hard enough time as it is."

"Agreed. If we cannot handle it, out we go." Rosaleen grinned. "What do we do first, and how much are we paid for our labors?"

"All you have to do is serve the drinks and make sure you get the customers' money. You get five dollars a night and you keep all the money you earn on the side."

Rosaleen knew what he meant by the latter. "We aren't that desperate." She cast a sneer at Mabel, the barmaid.

The bartender shrugged his shoulders as he wiped a shot glass with a dirty bar towel. "That's up to you girls."

"Do we have to wear those indecent costumes?" Janna asked, looking at the bartender.

"You don't have to, but you'll make better tips."

Rosaleen heaved a sigh of relief. "We'll pass, Mr. . . ."

"Hank, just Hank. What are your names?"

"I'm Rosaleen and this is Janna."

"Okay, Rosaleen and Janna, get to work."

"Leave my tables alone," Mabel said contemptuously. "I won't have you two goody-goodies stealing my best customers."

Rosaleen looked around the room and then turned to face Mabel. "I see no names on the tables indicatin' who serves whom. I'll serve whomever needs a drink, so if ye want yer precious tables, quit yer fraternizin' with the boss."

"Did you hear what she called me, Hank?"

"Stop sniveling, Mabel. She didn't call you anything, you dim-witted dolt. She said you were dawdling, and she's right. Get to work."

"I'll scratch her eyes out!" Mabel glared at Rosaleen.

"I wouldn't be doin' that, *cailleach*," Rosaleen said in a thick Irish brogue. "Ye be takin' on more than ye bargain for."

Mabel backed up against Hank and whined, "There she goes again, Hank, calling me names. I'm not going to work with a blue nose."

Hank sighed and threw the bar towel on the counter. "Like I told them, Mabel, I don't want no sniveling. If you can't take it, you know where the door is."

In a huff, Mabel flounced away from the bar, grumbling to herself.

Rosaleen lifted her chin and sashayed to the nearest table.

For three hours, the two young women waited on overly friendly drunks, Rosaleen slapping their hands away as they tried to paw her. It was a degrading job and one she wished she and Janna didn't have to do.

"Hey, Irish, how about another round of beer?" a man yelled in a drunken slur.

Rosaleen's cheeks burned as she stomped to the bar to order the drinks. Glancing around to find Janna, she felt guilt gnaw at her conscience. The men's lewd advances didn't easily intimidate her, but Janna was timid. Instead of slapping away the unwanted mauling, Janna simply slunk away. The men found even more amusement in exploiting her fear.

Janna rushed over to her at the bar. "Oh, Rosaleen, this is terrible. I don't think I can work here." Looking at the crowd of men behind them, Janna whimpered.

"Ye can go home if ye want to," Rosaleen offered. "I'll understand. I hate it also, but I need the job."

"I'm not going home without you." Janna attempted a smile. "Besides, I'd be too scared to go home alone."

"It should be closin' time soon. Are ye sure ye can handle it until then?" Rosaleen noticed how pale Janna was.

Janna nodded. "I'll try."

"Ye need to show these rowdy knaves who's boss, then they'll leave ye be."

"I know I should, but I'm scared of them. I'm just not as brave as you are, Rosaleen."

"Nonsense. Ye can do it."

"I'm all right as long as you're here. They're crude, but I don't think they'll harm me with the sheriff down the street."

"Yer right. They may be drunk, but they're not stupid. Tomorrow ye'll wonder why ye were so scared."

"I doubt it," Janna said with a weak laugh. "This isn't something I'll soon forget."

"Hey, Irish, where's my beer?"

Rosaleen grabbed the tray of beer. Then she marched over to the impatient man, slammed the tall pitchers of foaming ale on the table, and held out her hand for the money.

"I shouldn't have to pay you, since I had to wait so long."

Rosaleen tapped her foot. "Ye best be payin', or Hank will have yer head."

The drunken man seemed amused at Rosaleen's quick-tempered spirit, and he winked at his companions. Drawing a fifty-dollar gold piece from his pile of poker winnings, he thrust it in Rosaleen's pocket. Then, paying for the beer, he grinned. "That should be enough money to pay for one night, Irish."

Turning red with humiliation and anger, Rosaleen took the gold coin out of her pocket and threw it on the table. "I'm not a harlot, ye vile excuse for a man." Rosaleen stood with her hands on her hips, giving the man a defiant glare.

"Well, I'll be. Irish has scruples. Maybe I'll take what I want." The man rose from his chair.

"'Tis a hard thin' to do," Rosaleen said through clenched teeth, "but ye should treat a lady with more respect."

Before the man could grab her, Rosaleen roughly pushed him back into his chair. Then she kicked the chair out from under him and sent him sprawling backward. With arms akimbo, she glared into the startled faces around her. "What ye gapin' at? Have ye not seen a decent woman defend herself?"

The piano player stopped the music and stared along with everyone else in the room. Within a few minutes, the saloon was silent.

"If we be havin' any more trouble, I'll do the same to ye. Now get back to what ye were doin'."

To Rosaleen's surprise, the men did as she asked. Slowly, the piano started to play, and the dance-hall girls began their routine again. Noticing the other barmaids scowling at her, Rosaleen glared at them boldly and started for them, in no mood to let anyone browbeat her. The barmaids scattered like a flock of scared chickens.

Hank laughed at her display of bravery or pure stupidity, Rosaleen wasn't sure which, and motioned for her come to the bar.

"Now do not be scoldin' me, Hank. That lowlife had it comin'." Rosaleen stood boldly in front of him.

"I ain't gonna scold you. I was just debating whether I should hire you as a barmaid or a chucker."

Rosaleen saw the grin on Hank's face and relaxed. "This may be a low-class pub, Hank, but yer a first-class boss. Who knows, I may turn this place into an elegant drinkin' parlor for gentlemen."

"It wouldn't surprise me if you did. I suppose you'll work out as long as you don't manhandle too many customers." He shook his head. "You and your friend can go if you want. It's been a long night for the both of you. Follow me to the back, and I'll get your pay."

After Hank paid their wages, Rosaleen went to the storeroom for their shawls and bonnets. Suddenly, over the loud music and boisterous chatter, she heard a terrified scream. She ran back into the saloon and saw a man pulling Janna toward the swinging doors. It was Ward Masters.

Rosaleen dropped the shawls and bonnets on the floor and ran toward him. "What do ye think yer doin'? Let her go!"

Masters looked up and saw Rosaleen. "This is none of your affair, Paddy. Stay out of it."

"None of me affair, eh?" Rosaleen shouted. "We'll see about that."

She spied a large spittoon and grabbed it. Without thinking of the consequences, she ran to the retreating back of Ward Masters and dumped the spittoon over his head.

A muffled yell came from Masters as he pried the spittoon from his head. He threw it on the floor and then pushed his wet hair from his face. Spittle dripped onto his ruffled silk shirt.

Rosaleen decided he hadn't been humiliated enough, not after what he had done to Janna. She grabbed a table for advantage, raised both feet in the air, and booted him in the seat of the breeches. He flew through the air and landed spread eagle on the floor.

A cheer rose from the crowd as Rosaleen ran to Janna. "Are ye all right?"

"Y—yes, I think so," Janna stammered, clinging to Rosaleen. "Thank goodness you came when you did."

Rosaleen looked over at Masters, wary of turning her back on him. He was still down, arms and legs sprawled out awkwardly in the sawdust. Above the laughter, someone shouted, "Way to go, Irish."

Just then, Masters let out a growl and gave Rosaleen a murderous look. She began to quake but stood her ground. "I

told ye to leave us alone,” she spat out. “Ye wouldn’t want us to be tellin’ these fine gents what a lousy rogue ye really are, would ye?”

Before Masters could comment, Rosaleen’s brother burst through the swinging doors of the saloon.

“What trouble are ye in this time, Rosaleen Katherine?”

Janna ran into Shawn’s arms. “Thank goodness you’re here.”

He tenderly embraced the girl, then looked at Rosaleen. “Get your thin’s. We’re leavin’.”

“You’re not leaving with the girl, O’Shay,” Ward Masters roared. “She’s my property, and I intend to have her!”

Suddenly, Masters pulled a small derringer from his breast pocket. “Now, let her go.”

“Ye’ll have to shoot me first,” Shawn said, pushing Janna behind him for cover, “so ye best make yer first shot count.”

“Don’t worry, Paddy, there’s no competition.” Masters laughed and aimed the weapon.

“Put the gun away unless you want to die where you’re standing,” a cool voice warned from behind Masters. “I think this has gone far enough. I said, put the gun away! Now.”

Excitement surged through Rosaleen’s veins. She knew that voice, but from where?

She looked at the man, who was dressed as a cowboy, with his hat pulled low so that the brim hid his eyes. The cowboy stood off to the side of the bar, his gaze never wavering from Masters. Masters looked around the room, then back at the cowboy. He placed the pistol back in his pocket and headed for the doors. Then he stopped and glanced back at Shawn. “I’ll meet up with you again, O’Shay. Next time, you won’t have your friends or sister around to do your fighting for you.”

“I’ll be lookin’ forward to it, Masters,” Shawn replied through

clenched teeth.

After Masters left, several of the men approached Shawn, chuckling as they slapped him on the back.

"This sure has been an eventful evening," one of the men said, holstering his pistol. "Good thing your friend intervened."

Shawn looked around the saloon. "He wasn't my friend, but I'd like to thank him."

"He lit out right after Masters left. I'd have stepped in if'n he hadn't."

Shawn shook the man's hand. "Thanks for yer help, Adam. I did not know I'd have to pack a gun to come lookin' for me sister."

Next, Shawn directed his attention to his sister. "What do ye think yer doin' here, Rosaleen Katherine? Did ye not know how worried Mama and Da are?"

Rosaleen clasped her hands behind her back. "I left a note sayin' where I was goin'."

"Is this your sister, Shawn?" Adam asked in surprise.

"Aye, she's me sister." Shawn glared at Rosaleen.

"Well, I'll be durn! She sure is a fighter, like a banty chicken, all scrawny and tough." Adam laughed and explained what she'd done to him. Then, with a red face, Adam apologized to Rosaleen and Shawn for his crude offer to buy her for the night.

"Nay, do not apologize, Adam. She had it comin', workin' in a pub. Besides—" he chuckled "—I think ye got the worst end of the disagreement.

Adam agreed.

"Well, we better go. Me parents are already worried sick." Shawn gave his sister another scowl.

Adam removed his holster and gun and handed both to Shawn. "You best take this. That varmint may be lurking out there in the dark just waiting for you."

Shawn thanked Adam and told him he'd return the gun to him at work the next day.

Rosaleen sulked all the way home, at one point saying bitterly, "This is the thanks I get for helpin' me family."

"Yer more hindrance than help," Shawn responded with another glare. "Mama has been pacin' the floor all evenin'."

"But I was only—" Rosaleen tried to protest.

"Nay, no excuses, Rosaleen Katherine. Ye were in the wrong. Tis one thin' to shame yerself by fraternizin' with such scoundrels, but to involve Janna is downright wicked."

"Please, Shawn, don't blame Rosaleen for my working there," Janna pleaded. "It was just as much my fault."

"Nay, lassie. I know me sister well, and I'd bet it was her idea for ye to work in the pub."

Rosaleen frowned. "I did not think it a wicked thin' to do when I was only tryin' to ease the burdens for Mama and Da."

"I'll not speak of it more. Mama and Da will tend to ye when we get home," Shawn snapped.

Rosaleen looked at Janna's pitiful expression and lapsed into silence. Her thoughts drifted back to the events at the saloon. Who was that cowboy? The voice sounded familiar but she couldn't place where she had heard it before. Whoever he was, he had certainly sent her heart in a whirl. She had looked for him, but when Masters left the saloon, he disappeared also.

Rosaleen lagged behind when they neared the housing district, wondering what her parents would think about what she had done tonight. Surely, she thought, they'd be more sympathetic than Shawn was.

"Ye go on home, Rosaleen Katherine. I'm walkin' Janna to the McNallys."

"Do not leave me now, Shawn! Can't ye wait until after I see Mama and Da?" Rosaleen asked desperately.

"Nay, Rosaleen," Shawn replied with a laugh. "If yer tough enough to work in a pub, yer tough enough to face our parents. 'Tis time ye grew up and learned to deal with the consequences ye have created for yerself."

* * * * *

"Rosaleen, yer safe!" Maureen exclaimed when her daughter entered the cabin. She hurried to Rosaleen and caught her in a tearful hug. "We were so worried, lass."

"We sent Shawn to fetch ye," Patrick said. "Did ye see him?"

"Aye, Da, he found me," Rosaleen said weakly. "He is walkin' Janna home."

"Where have ye been? Did ye not know how worried we'd be when ye did not come home, especially after last night?"

"I'm sorry Da. I had no idea I'd be out so late when I left this morn. Janna and I found a job today. We've been workin'."

Maureen frowned. "Where would ye be workin' this late, eh?"

Rosaleen drew a deep breath. "We found a job at a pub."

"Holy Saint Patrick's in the morn!" With a gasp, Maureen plunked herself into her rocking chair.

Simultaneously, Patrick shouted, "A pub! Me own daughter workin' in a pub? What could ye have been thinkin' of to work in such a place? These American pubs aren't the same as the ones in Ireland, with no one but yer kith and kin about ye. These are thieves and murderers, men with no conscience or honor. I'm ashamed of ye, Rosaleen Katherine."

Rosaleen grabbed her father's arm, her tears threatening. "I'm sorry, Da. I did not mean for ye to grieve so. I just wanted to help ye and Mama. The job at the pub was the only one I could find."

“We’d rather be dirt poor than see ye harmed in any way.” Maureen shook her head angrily. “Did ye not think of the consequences?”

“Nay, Mama, I only wanted to help. I want us to go west with our comrades. I’d do anythin’ to get us there!”

“How about marry?”

“Marry?” Rosaleen gave her father a puzzled look. “What does marryin’ have to do with goin’ to California?”

“Oh, nothin’, I guess.” Patrick leaned back in his chair, looking thoughtful.

Rosaleen examined his face. “I’ll never marry. I’ve seen what men are like, and they cannot be trusted. I’ll not bend to any man.”

“Ye mustn’t be bitter against all men because of a few.” Maureen sounded calmer than she had only moments earlier. “When the right man comes along, ye’ll change yer tune.”

Rosaleen shook her head violently. “I’m sorry, Mama. I’ve made me mind up—I’ll not marry. Ye never know what’s inside the heart of a man until it’s too late.”

“We shall see, m’dear. We shall see.” Maureen smiled at her daughter. “Ye best be goin’ to bed now. ’Tis late.”

“Ye’ll not be goin’ back to work in a pub,” Patrick said sternly.

“Nay, Da, I’ll not go back,” Rosaleen promised. Then she kissed her parents good night.

After Rosaleen closed the partition, Maureen whispered to Patrick, “Rosaleen is a stubborn lassie. She did mean well, I suppose.”

“Aye, that she did. But as I stated earlier, she’s too high spirited. She needs to grow up a wee bit and stop bein’ so childish.” Patrick chuckled. “What she really needs is for a good man to turn her over his knee.”

"I agree with ye, Patrick." His wife sighed. "But ye heard her tonight, she intends to never marry."

Patrick picked up the newspaper, then smiled mischievously and gave his wife a wink. "That's what she thinks."

* * * * *

After escorting Janna to the McNallys' house, Shawn whistled absently as he walked home, his thoughts still on the lovely girl with hazel eyes and honey-colored hair. He recalled how she had shied from his touch, as though she feared he would harm her. He had tried to reassure her, and when he couldn't, he vowed to prove that his love for her was honorable. Deep in his heart, he knew she was the woman he wanted for his wife.

Shawn was jarred from his happy thoughts when he entered the small cabin and heard his parents arguing quietly.

"Ye cannot be serious, Patrick!" Maureen said harshly. "Ye cannot marry yer daughter off to a stranger."

Patrick wrote something on a piece of paper. "If Rosaleen isn't goin' to take charge of her life, then I'll just give her a wee push," he mumbled to himself. Then he looked up at his wife. "Me mind is made up, me darlin'. 'Tis time Rosaleen Katherine grew up."

"I can see where she gets her stubbornness. I be warnin' ye, she'll not take this lightly, husband."

"'Twill do her no good. I be her father, and she will do as I say."

Maureen leaned back in her chair and picked up her sewing. "Yer just tryin' to convince yerself, Patrick, for ye knew how willful our eldest daughter is."

"Do not fear, darlin'. If I do not like the lad, Rosaleen shall not marry him. I'll be sure she marries a fittin' man before I give

me consent. Besides, 'tis considered proper to match yer daughter in Ireland."

Shawn laughed out loud. "Are ye doin' what I think yer doin', Da? Are ye goin' to marry Rosaleen off to one of those men in the paper?"

"Aye, lad, and do not think ye can change me mind," Patrick said, shaking his finger at Shawn.

Shawn looked into his father's mischievous green eyes. "Good luck." He went to the hearth and poured a cup of tea. "I'll not be tryin' to stop ye."

"Shawn!" His mother looked aghast. "How can ye condone yer father's actions? 'Tis not right what he intends to do."

"I'm sorry, Mama, but I agree with Da. Rosaleen needs to tame down, and if it's by gettin' married, then so be it."

"Well, I'll have no part of it."

Shawn sat next to his father at the table and explained to his parents the events of that evening. When he finished, he said, "So ye see, Mama, somethin' needs to be done with Rosaleen Katherine. She's much too obstinate and headstrong. 'Tis goin' to get her in trouble, ye mark me words. She needs a strong hand, and one who isn't afraid of her temper."

"I cannot believe Rosaleen brawled in a pub." Maureen shook her head sadly.

"If I hadn't come when I did, there is no tellin' what would have happened. Masters surely would have kidnapped Janna." Then Shawn turned angry. "Rosaleen had no business involvin' Janna in such a scheme."

"Do ye see now, mavourneen, why I am determined to find me daughter a mate? 'Tis best for Rosaleen."

Maureen placed her hand over her husband's. "Pray about it, Patrick. Let the Lord guide ye."

SIX



Blaise sat in the drawing room with a scowl on his face. He took the decanter of brandy from the liquor cabinet, unstopped it, and then thought beter of it. Drinking wouldn't solve his problems.

"Blast," he said under his breath. Why had he thought it would be simple to choose a bride of convenience? Numerous women had answered his ad, but they were mostly doddering old maids with demanding mothers, or foolish young schoolgirls without a brain in their pretty little heads. None would consent to Blaise's terms for the marriage, wanting nothing to do with an annulment so soon after the wedding. And while he wondered if the small farm he offered as bait simply wasn't enough to attract a woman of a typical marrying age, he decided to run his ad for one more week. If he didn't find a wife by then, he would come up with another plan.

It was too bad the Irish lass wasn't available. The last thing Blaise had expected when he entered the saloon the other night was to find the redheaded vixen serving drinks. He cautiously watched her from a corner table, admiring her spunk. He would

have loved to tease her again, but after the altercation with the man named Ward Masters, he had a gut feeling the man would be waiting for her in a dark alley. He had slipped out of the saloon unnoticed and followed Masters just to be sure he didn't try anything.

"Here you are, Blaise. I've been looking for you." Amanda entered the drawing room and plopped down next to Blaise on the settee. "I thought maybe you had an appointment with another young lady."

Blaise caught the hint of amusement in his sister's soft voice. "You don't have to gloat over my misery, Mandy. I'm having a difficult time as it is finding a chit to marry."

"Do I hear a faint tremor of rebuff in your voice?"

"No more than the mockery I hear in your voice."

Amanda folded her arms across her chest. "Blaise, there's no need to take your black mood out on me. I told you from the very beginning that this scheme wouldn't work."

"Thanks for your confidence, sweet sister. As you know, I'm doing this for Mother and Father, and I could use your support."

Amanda stared at her brother. "What could I possibly do to help? You know I'd do anything to help find out what happened to Mother and Father." Amanda rose from the settee. "This is entirely my fault. I shall never forgive myself."

Rising from his seat, Blaise stood before his sister and placed his hands on her shoulders. "We went through all this before, Mandy. Stop torturing yourself. Have you ever thought how fortunate we are that you know what happened at the ranch with Kincaid? If you'd been taken also, we'd really be in the dark."

"I know you're right, dear brother." Amanda sighed and covered Blaise's hand with hers. "I guess I've been feeling sorry for myself, so I didn't think of it that way. It's like a blessing in

disguise. I'm just so worried about Mother and Father. I wish there was something I could do to help you. At least it would give me something else to think about."

"I wish you could help too, but I don't know what to do myself. Nothing is turning out as I'd anticipated." Blaise sighed and slumped down in a comfortable wing-back chair. "If I have no takers from this week's ad, I'll have to think of some other way to get Kincaid off the ranch and find Mother and Father."

Amanda's face blanched at the mention of Kincaid. She sighed heavily and sat back down on the settee. "I don't know how things are going to work out for us, Blaise, but the waiting is unnerving. It's been so long since anyone has seen Mother and Father. Do you think they're still alive?"

Blaise looked into his sister's fear-filled eyes. "Mr. Withers is confident they are. Father's signature is on all of the papers pertaining to the ranch. It's a good thing Father made out a will or Kincaid wouldn't need him alive to sign the bank drafts. It would be pure stupidity on Kincaid's part if he disposed of Father and Mother. I've never met the—" Blaise changed his words at his sister's disapproving scowl "—man but he doesn't strike me as stupid. I'll have to be careful when I get to Stockton."

"Yes, my dear brother. I cannot stress enough the need to be cautious. All our neighbors are frightened of Lance, and I'm sorry to say it, but trust no one."

"Don't worry, Mandy. I'll be fine. I have the advantage of surprise on Kincaid. He won't know what hit him."

A knock sounded and Blaise turned to see the drawing-room doors open.

"Sorry to interrupt, Mr. Cameron and Miss Cameron," the butler said. "The mail has just arrived, and I thought you'd want to see it as soon as possible."

"Thanks, Fletcher." Blaise reached for the mail, then excused

the servant and rifled through the envelopes. "More ladies in waiting. I'm half tempted not to bother reading their letters."

"Who knows, your future bride may be among them." Amanda giggled, but at the darkening scowl on Blaise's face, she added soothingly, "You're doing what you feel necessary."

Muttering to himself, Blaise read the first two letters and angrily flung them into the flames in the hearth. As he opened the last letter, his brows rose with curiosity.

"Well, anyone worth checking on?"

Blaise ran his fingers across his grizzled chin. "I don't know, sis. It's a strange letter. It's from a Patrick O'Shay. He wants to marry his daughter off."

"You haven't received any letters from a father before, have you?"

Blaise shook his head and continued reading the letter. "No, this is the first. They're Irish immigrants."

"What's the girl's name?"

"Her father doesn't say. He claims she's a bonny lass, but a little high-spirited."

"Are you going to check it out?" Amanda didn't sound hopeful.

"I think I will. A foreign simpleton may just be the answer to our problems." Blaise's mouth twisted into a wry smile.

"Blaise! How can you be so callous? You're not going to trick this poor Irish girl into marriage, are you?"

Seeing the appalled look on his sister's face, Blaise laughed. "Of course not. It'll be an easy way out for her as well as for me."

"I can't believe you're actually going through with this!" Amanda rose from the settee. "You're going to ruin this poor girl's chance of ever finding a husband after you divorce her. No man wants a girl who's impure."

Blaise snickered. "Amanda Cameron, you say the silliest things. What on earth made you think of that?"

"It isn't silly!" Amanda blushed. "A girl must think of those things, even if men don't."

"Don't fear, little sister. I don't intend to demand conjugal rights as a husband. I don't want any brats left behind with my blood flowing through their veins."

"What a brutish thing to say!"

"You're the one who brought the matter to our attention, Mandy dear. I was merely relieving your fears."

"Well, I'm happy to hear you're not going to ruin the girl, but I don't want to be involved in your deceitful ploy any longer."

"I'm not going to do anything to harm the girl. I've told you that."

"I'm not going to worry about it anyway. Looking the way you do, no woman will consent to marriage, no matter what you think." Amanda pouted prettily and folded her arms across her chest.

"And what, pray tell, is wrong with my appearance?" Blaise knew what his sister would say; they'd had this conversation many times since he returned home.

"You look like ruffraff, a ruffian, with that long hair and shaggy beard."

Blaise rubbed his cheek and answered nonchalantly, "You may be right, Mandy. Perhaps I should freshen up a bit. This beard is getting rather uncomfortable as the days grow warmer."

"Well, I'll be! I've been after you ever since you returned home from the war to present yourself properly." Amanda smiled impishly. "This Irish lass seems to have an influence on you already."

"Don't be foolish, Amanda. I've never even seen her!" Then

he fibbed, "I planned on shaving."

Embarrassed by Amanda's uncanny ability to read his thoughts, Blaise excused himself from the drawing room. He wrote to Patrick O'Shay and requested his presence at the Chateau La Belle Restaurant at nine o'clock, and then called a servant to deliver the message. Then Blaise smiled to himself and raced up the stairs to get ready.

While relaxing in a bath of hot, foaming water, Blaise thought of the conversation with Amanda. She was wrong about the Irish lass. The girl had no influence on him. How absurd to think that any woman could run his life! If not for his father's will he'd never have thought of the wretched plan, let alone marry a total stranger. He had too many wild oats to sow before settling down.

Blaise couldn't fathom why O'Shay's daughter kept popping into his mind, except as a simple solution to his problem. Perhaps it was because he kept seeing the girl from the street—that redheaded minx—in his sleep. No, it was because there would be no prominent family to answer to, and he could go about his business with no questions asked.

Anxious to get his plan in motion, Blaise finished his bath.

* * * * *

As she finished the dinner dishes, Rosaleen threw her parents a suspicious glance. On several occasions in the past week, they had whispered together with Shawn as though they shared a secret. She had asked them about it numerous times, and in response they only smiled and said it was nothing. Since her family always confided in one another, she knew if she waited long enough, they would reveal their secret. But she was getting impatient.

Rosaleen looked again at her parents, who sat talking with

Shawn. They had been angry with her for several days after the saloon incident, but that couldn't have anything to do with whatever they were cooking up now, could it?

Earlier that evening, a messenger had delivered a note to Rosaleen's father. After he opened it, he and her mother and Shawn had whispered excitedly among themselves. They kept throwing Rosaleen an occasional glance as though they wanted to be sure she didn't overhear them. What on earth was going on?

Just as she decided to question her parents again, Rosaleen saw her father and Shawn preparing to leave. Her skin pricked with dread.

"Da, where are ye and Shawn goin'?" she asked. "Ye haven't decided to fight Ward Masters, have ye?"

"Nay, lass. This has nothin' to do with that trash," Patrick said vaguely.

"Where ye be goin', then?" Rosaleen pressed.

"We're seein' a man. 'Tis simple as that, lass. Now stop pesterin' me."

Her father had never spoken sharply to her before, and Rosaleen's eyes filled with tears.

"I'm sorry, lass. 'Tis not yer fault I'm edgy. I'll be explainin' everythin' to ye tomorrow. Do not fret so."

Stunned and hurt by her father's words, Rosaleen went to her bed and closed the curtain. She felt safe within the small cubicle, and she released her pent-up tears. What could be so terrible that would cause her father to snap at her, and her family to divide against each other? Her father said she would find out tomorrow, but now Rosaleen wasn't sure she wanted to know.

Shawn saw the troubled look on his father's face. This new

problem only added to the older man's suffering.

Shawn would explain to Rosaleen how important it was to their father that she make it to California. Their father had sacrificed everything to come to America so his children wouldn't suffer in Ireland. Patrick wanted Rosaleen to marry this man so she could make it to California, even if the rest of the O'Shays never did. And since Patrick only wanted Rosaleen to be happy, Shawn would convince her to cooperate with the plan. Shawn loved his sister and felt she would benefit from an arranged marriage. She needed a good man to settle down with, even if she didn't think so now. She would be happy on a farm again. Their father had excellent judgment, and Shawn knew he wouldn't accept just any man for Rosaleen.

Patrick hesitated outside the grand restaurant. Shawn could sense his father's internal struggle—how he wondered if he was doing the right thing for his daughter.

Shawn put his arm around his father and gave him a squeeze. "I know what yer thinkin', Da, but we must go through with it for Rosaleen's sake. 'Tis for the best, ye'll see."

"Ye be right, laddie. All I needed was to know I was doin' the right thin'. Let's get it over with."

* * * * *

Blaise sat at a small table in the corner of the large dining room, hoping for privacy when his guests arrived. He didn't know what to expect, but he wanted to be prepared.

It wasn't uncommon for a father to give his consent for a daughter to marry someone she didn't know, yet Blaise felt uncomfortable. He had good reason to marry a stranger, but what reason did Mr. O'Shay have for marrying off his daughter without her consent? Blaise decided either O'Shay wanted a handsome

price for his daughter, or she was too ugly to wed on her own.

Through a cloud of pipe smoke, Blaise saw the matron speaking with two men, then point in his direction. Assuming one of the men was Patrick O'Shay, Blaise eyed them critically. They appeared presentable enough in their homespun woolen suits.

When the two men arrived at the table, Blaise rose respectfully and shook the older gentleman's hand.

"Yer Mr. Cameron?" The man gaped at Blaise's elegant suit.

Blaise cleared his throat. "Yes, sir. I'm Blaise Cameron, and you must be Mr. Patrick O'Shay."

"Aye, ye be right, laddie. This is me eldest *bairn*, Shawn."

As he clasped Shawn's right hand in a firm grip, Blaise had a funny feeling he knew the tall, powerful-looking young man. "Have we met before?"

Shawn gave Blaise a long stare as if trying to remember. "No, no, I do not think we've met, Mr. Cameron."

Blaise invited them to sit, then beckoned a serving maid for drinks. After ordering himself another brandy, he asked what his guests preferred. He lifted an eyebrow when they both ordered peppermint tea.

Blaise discreetly observed the two men. Somehow, he had expected a small weasel with squinting, beady eyes, looking for whatever he could get for his daughter. He was pleasantly surprised at the apparent integrity of Patrick and his towering son, who resembled each other with their green eyes and reddish brown hair.

The senior O'Shay did not look well. Blaise felt an odd sympathy for the man, and he wondered why he should feel compassion for someone he had only just met. Perhaps Mr. O'Shay reminded him of his father, or maybe it was seeing a father and son together that pulled at his heartstrings.

The silence at the small table grew uncomfortable, yet Blaise

found it difficult to start the conversation. He could have dealt with the rirraff he had expected, but he felt a pang of guilt at the ruse he planned against this honest man and his family.

“’Twould seem to me, laddie, ye be havin’ second thoughts about me daughter,” Patrick finally said. “I told me wife I should not have mentioned her temper. Is that what ye find at fault, Mr. Cameron?”

“Please, sir, call me Blaise. That’s not the problem at all, Mr. O’Shay.”

“Ye must also use me Christian name, Blaise. What ’tis the problem, then? Is me daughter not good enough for ye?”

Blaise shook his head. “Not at all, Patrick. The fact is, I may not be worthy of your daughter.”

The statement seemed to surprise the older man. “What gives ye that idea? Ye not be runnin’ from the law or anythin’, are ye?”

Blaise couldn’t help laughing. “No, sir, it’s nothing like that. You, of course, know I don’t love your daughter. I mean I’ve never even met her.” In order to ensure his own parents’ safety, Blaise couldn’t tell the entire truth.

Patrick chuckled. “Do not fret so, Blaise. Once ye meet me daughter, ye will love her. She’s a sweet lass under that fiery temper of hers. Ye’ll see.”

“She may not want to marry me.”

“Rosaleen has no choice in the matter, Blaise. If I feel ye be good for me darlin’ lass, then it shall be done.”

“Aren’t you afraid she might come to harm? We’ll be a long way from you.” Blaise couldn’t disillusion the man.

“I be worryin’ about ye, Blaise, not her. Me Rosaleen is a spirited lass. If ye ever harmed her, ’twould be ye that would suffer. Take me word for it.”

“Aye, Mr. Cameron. Da is right,” Shawn said. “Rosaleen needs a strong man to tame her.”

Blaise shook his head in confusion. "Can I ask why you want to marry your daughter in this manner?"

"I'll be answerin' yer questions, laddie, but I expect ye to answer some when I'm through," Patrick said. "We came to America a year past, hopin' for a better life for me family. 'Twas not to happen, though. We cannot seem to get enough money saved to venture west. If it's not the Lord's will to see me in California, then at least I want me daughter to have her dream. I would do anythin' for me child's happiness."

Blaise felt his throat grow dry. How could he continue with his scheme? This family deserved better, and he couldn't take advantage of their trust. How would he get out of it without offending them?

"Well, Blaise, why do ye be wantin' to marry me Rosaleen?"

Blaise looked at the two men sitting across from him. He thought of going along with them, and then when he met the girl, he'd appear the blackguard he was. Instead, he lied. "I just served four years in the war. I have my life ahead of me, and I want to settle down. There are very few girls of marrying age back home to choose from, and I don't want to marry a city girl that doesn't know or won't like the life she'd be living on a farm. I just don't have the time to court a girl in the proper fashion. I've been away from home too long, and I want to get there as soon as possible."

Patrick looked relieved. "Love will come with me Rosaleen. She may balk at first, but she'll get use to the idea."

Blaise brightened. The girl didn't want to marry. It would be easy to renege when she backed out.

Interrupting Blaise's thoughts, Patrick asked, "Where in California do ye live?"

"I have a one-hundred-acre farm not far from Stockton. The house is small, only four bedrooms, but it's comfortable." Blaise

paused, remembering the happy times his family had shared in their first home out west.

Patrick and Shawn looked at him expectantly, so he pushed away the memories and asked with feigned enthusiasm, "When would you like Miss O'Shay and me to meet?"

"Tomorrow night, ye come a callin'. She'll be awaitin' to meet ye," Patrick promised.

* * * * *

Rosaleen knew if she were to make it through the day with her sanity, she'd have to keep busy. When her father and Shawn had come home the night before, she'd heard them whispering excitedly to her mother. Whatever they were planning, Rosaleen would find out tonight, and she had a feeling she wouldn't like it. Why else would they keep it a secret from her?

Donning an old frock, Rosaleen pushed the long sleeves up to her elbows. Then she tied a bright green handkerchief over her auburn curls. Cleaning the hearth wasn't her favorite job, but at least the physical activity kept her mind from wandering.

On her hands and knees, Rosaleen scrubbed the hearth. Sitting back on her haunches, she wiped the moisture from her forehead, leaving a streak of black soot. She took the rag and tried to remove some of the blackened soot from her arms, but she ended up making her arms even blacker.

Suddenly, the mine's emergency siren pierced the air, and Rosaleen's heart nearly stopped. The pot in her mother's hands clamored to the floor. In the wake of the siren's echo, Maureen let out a strangled scream and then raced from the cabin.

Within seconds, Rosaleen and Shannon darted outside and joined the dozens of frantic women who rushed to the coal mine. Rosaleen knew they all silently prayed that their husbands and

sons and brothers and fathers would survive the cave-in.

Searching the crowd, Rosaleen finally saw her mother running toward the mine. Rosaleen seized the ashen-faced Shannon by the hand and they ran, arriving at the mine site and just after Maureen joined Janna and the McNallys.

As Rosaleen and Shannon hurried to join the others, Rosaleen looked toward the mine shaft that swallowed her kin each morning and then spat them out weak and ill each night. A suffocating cloud of dust obscured the mine entrance. Men were trapped in that shaft, and there was only a small chance they would make it out alive. Rosaleen prayed her father and Shawn were safe and not behind the cave-in.

Still clinging to Shannon's hand, she weaved through the frantic crowd and finally made it to her mother. Then, Rosaleen felt someone grab her arm and turned to see Janna.

"I can't believe this is happening! Surely everyone will get out safely, Rosaleen!"

"I pray so, Janna," Rosaleen replied hoarsely, never taking her eyes from the mine entrance.

For two long, torturous hours, relatives waited for the crew of men to dig through the wall of earth that trapped the workers.

The minutes dragged into hours as Rosaleen tried to comfort her mother through the agonizing ordeal. How she wanted to go to the workers and scream at them to hurry, but she knew they were doing their best to rescue the trapped men. So, knowing their fate was in God's hands, Rosaleen did the only thing she could do, and that was to pray that God would save her family.

Another hour slowly passed before they heard shouts of victory. Rosaleen and her mother pushed their way through the crowd to the makeshift hospital. The emergency crew brought out a dozen injured, semiconscious mine workers from the mine

before Maureen let out a tearful screech.

Knowing it had to be her father or brother, Rosaleen ran blindly toward them. As soon as the two men eased the stretcher down, Rosaleen and her mother dropped down beside it. At first, Rosaleen thought her mother had made a mistake, but when she knelt closer she recognized her brother, Shawn, his face covered with grime. Afraid of the worst, Rosaleen gently shook him. "Shawn, 'tis Mama and me," she murmured softly.

"Aye, 'tis yer Mama. Open yer eyes! Do not frighten me so. Open yer eyes, Shawn!" Clearly, Maureen was on the verge of panic.

Shawn moaned and tried to raise his head. He opened his eyes but quickly closed them with a painful howl.

"Shawn, what 'tis the matter?" his mother demanded. "What 'tis wrong with yer eyes?"

Dread filled Rosaleen as she realized her brother might be blind, and when she looked at her mother, she knew she thought the same thing.

With another attempt to open his eyes, Shawn blinked them several times.

"Can ye see, Shawn?"

"Aye, Mama, I can see now. 'Tis a wee bleary, but I can see." He smiled weakly. "I feel I have a ton of dirt in me eyes." Then his face clouded over. "What happened, Mama? How is Da? He didn't get hurt too bad, did he?"

Maureen sighed. "I was goin' to ask ye the same thin'. They haven't brought him out yet."

"I've got to go help find Da!" Shawn tried to get up but fell back.

Maureen gently held him down. "There's nothin' ye can do, son. Ye cannot even get up. Everythin' that can be done is bein' done already,"

"Why did the mine cave in?" Rosaleen asked.

Shawn's face pinched with pain. "The blasted timbers gave way. We've told the company foreman time and time again they were rotten, but he wouldn't listen. Da heard the timbers givin' way before I did. He yelled at me to get out, and then pushed me just as the timbers crashed down."

"Alas!" Maureen muttered.

" "'Twill be a miracle if Da's alive." Tears now streamed from Shawn's eyes.

"Do not say such a thin', Shawn! Of course, he's alive. We have to have faith."

"Aye, Mama, we have to have faith."

After kissing her son on the cheek, Maureen told Rosaleen to stay with him while she went to watch the rest of the men come out of the mine. "Yer da will be comin' out soon, and I want to be there."

"I hope she's right, sis," Shawn said softly. Then he took a closer look at his sister. "What were ye doin', tryin' to dig us out yerself?"

Rosaleen looked down at her soiled dress and then smiled at her brother. "I forgot how dirty I was. When we heard the emergency siren, we left in a hurry. But I would've dug ye out if they'd let me."

Shawn raised his head and looked around them. "Where are Shannon and Janna?"

"They're here somewhere. Mama and I left them when they started bringin' the men out. Janna will be relieved to hear ye are safe."

"I'm sorry, miss, but this young man is next to see the doctor," an orderly said brusquely. Without waiting for a reply, he and another man picked up the stretcher and headed for the makeshift hospital tent.

"I'll tell Janna yer all right," Rosaleen called to Shawn as he disappeared into the tent.

She found Shannon and Janna and told them Shawn was safe but that her father was still in the mine.

"Why don't you go find your mother?" Janna said. "Shannon and I will go and stay with Shawn until you can come for him."

Rosaleen thanked her friend and left. When she finally found her mother, she gasped at her ashen countenance. Rosaleen followed her mother's stare, expecting to see her father's dead body.

Mrs. McCarty knelt in a crumpled heap, crying out the death chant—the *caoine*. Lying beside her was the body of her husband. Whispering another prayer for her father's safety, Rosaleen also prayed for Mrs. McCarty and her children.

Finally, when Rosaleen thought her heart would burst with agony, rescuers brought her father out of the mine. As Rosaleen and her mother fled to Patrick's side, one of the rescuers called exultantly, "He's alive! He has a broken leg, but he's alive!"

Maureen smiled through her tears and placed a tender kiss on her husband's dirty face. "I was afeard ye was dead."

Patrick smiled up at his beloved wife. "Luck of the Irish, that's what I be."

SEVEN



By the time the O'Shays crowded into the McNallys' wagon and left the coal mine, workers had located all the men trapped in the cave-in. To everyone's sorrow, ten men had died and over forty had been injured.

Shawn would be out of work for several weeks with bruised ribs. Patrick, however, would be out of commission much longer. The fractured tibia in his left leg would be in a cast for several months, and he would not be able to return to any kind of work for at least that long, if ever. With Shawn injured and Patrick unable to hold down a job, the family wondered how they would survive, and where they would live if the mining company evicted them.

Later that evening, as the O'Shay clan sat around the hearth, they heard a knock on the door.

"I forgot about Mr. Cameron," Patrick exclaimed from his bed.

Immediately, all eyes focused on Rosaleen, who shook her head in confusion and went to the door.

When Rosaleen opened the door, she saw a distinguished-looking young man of medium frame. He appeared to be in his

late twenties and was quite handsome. His hair, the color of golden wheat, was cut in a long style that complemented his angular jawline. Rosaleen noted his full lips and the cleft in his chin as he smiled at her confidently.

Raising her gaze, Rosaleen stared into stunning blue eyes fringed with long, dark brown lashes. His eyes seemed to devour her very soul.

Rosaleen smoothed her unruly hair, relieved she had bathed and donned a clean frock. "Can I help ye?"

"If you're Miss Rosaleen O'Shay, you may."

Why does he seem so familiar? "That's who I be, sir. Who might ye be?"

"Why, I'm Blaise Cameron, your betrothed. Don't you recognize me? I guess you're a lady after all." The man winked and gave Rosaleen a boyish grin.

Rosaleen studied his face. Now she remembered him! He was the grubby soldier, who had almost run her down on his horse—twice. But now he was cleaned up like a Sunday preacher.

"What kind of hoax is this? I've never seen ye before in me life except when ye tried to run me over with yer horse! That does not make me yer fiancé!" Rosaleen put her hands on her hips and tapped her foot wildly on the dirt floor as she waited for a reply.

"This is no hoax, I assure you, Miss O'Shay. I'm to marry you." He licked his lips, clearly nervous now. "Perhaps it's fate we meet again."

"Bah! Wishful thinkin' on yer part, I'm sure," Rosaleen said tartly. "I do not know what game yer playin', but ye best leave before I lose me temper."

"I'm sorry, Miss O'Shay. I thought your father told you about me. It was his idea we marry, but I take it you don't want to accept my proposal?"

"How dare ye imply me own da would marry me off without

tellin' me! What are ye to gain with all yer lies?"

"If you don't believe me, Miss O'Shay, ask your father. I must admit I may change my mind about marrying you. I'd prefer to marry a woman, not a child."

"Rosaleen Katherine, that will be enough. Mr. Cameron speaks the truth."

Rosaleen turned on her heels, staring at her father in shock. "What do ye mean he speaks the truth, Da? Ye wouldn't marry me off to the likes of him."

Patrick grimaced with pain as he tried to sit up in the bed. "I meant to tell ye, but with all that happened today, it slipped me mind."

The one-room cabin seemed to close in on Rosaleen. "'Tis such a wee thin' to tell me that ye forgot? What madness is this?"

"Yer mother and I thought it would be for the best for ye to marry," Patrick said. Then he turned to Blaise. "Would it be all right if ye stepped out for a bit so I can explain this to me daughter?"

Blaise nodded and said he would return shortly. Rosaleen watched him leave and then whirled around to face her parents. "What have you done to me?"

"I know this is a shock to ye, me darlin', so please sit ye down and I'll start at the beginnin'." Patrick glanced at his wife and sighed. "I replied to Mr. Cameron's advertisement in the paper for a mail-order bride. He kindly responded to me letter, so Shawn and I met with him last night."

"A mail-order bride? Why did ye think I wanted to be one of those?"

Rosaleen's father held up his hand. "Just let me finish, darlin'. This Mr. Cameron lives in California, and ye know how yer Mama and me want our family to live in California, and since

we all cannot be goin' yet, at least you can. I understand ye do not know Mr. Cameron, but that will pass. He seems to be a fine lad. Ye need a good man to settle ye down, so we decided ye are to marry him. It would be an honorable agreement in Ireland."

"We're not in Ireland, Da! Arranged marriages aren't an American custom. I refuse to marry that—that man!" Rosaleen folded her arms in defiance.

"Aye, ye will, lass," her mother said calmly. "'Tis what yer da and me decided."

Rosaleen looked from her father to her mother. "Do you mean I do not have a say in the matter? 'Tis my future ye play with. I'll not leave me clan and go across America with a stranger."

"'Tis for the best," Patrick said. "Ye'll see."

Rosaleen's head began to pound. With a defeated moan, she ran behind the curtain, threw herself on the bed, and wept bitterly. Had her parents gone mad? What made them think she'd want to marry that blackguard? She wouldn't leave her family, especially since her father couldn't work. Her mother needed her here.

In her tearful state, Rosaleen didn't hear Shawn enter the small room, but she looked up when he sat on the edge of the bed. "I'm not goin' to do it, Shawn. I will not marry a stranger and leave me family."

Shawn massaged his bandaged ribs. "Ye have to, Rosaleen. It would mean a lot to Mama and Da for ye to go to California."

Rosaleen wiped the tears from her cheek with the back of her hand. "I'd think Mama and Da would rather see the family together. I'd rather rot here in Pennsylvania than venture alone to California."

"That's a fine thin', Rosaleen Katherine. Yer thinkin' of no one but yerself. What about Mama and Da? Do ye think this is easy for them? Nay, lass, 'tis not." After a pause, Shawn continued

in a calmer tone, "'Twas a hard decision for them to make. With Da unable to work, thin's are goin' to be rough. 'Tis their wish to see ye happy. Besides, with a wee bit of Irish luck, the rest of our clan may be able to go to California next year. I could get a night job and still work at the mine once my ribs heal. Mama can find a second job, and we'll save what we can."

"But Shawn, that's a lot of dreamin'. What if ye cannot come?"

Shawn put his arm around her shoulders. "There are a lot of what-ifs, Rosaleen. We'll just have to have faith everythin' will work out for the best."

After placing a kiss on his sister's wet cheek, Shawn left.

What am I to do, Lord? Rosaleen prayed silently. *How can I leave me family and marry a total stranger?* Her fervent prayer only left her perplexed and anxious. Maybe deep down in her soul she didn't want to know what the Lord wanted her to do.

Maybe she could convince the horrid man not to marry her. Her parents couldn't get upset at her if Mr. Cameron changed his mind. "That's what I'll do," she muttered triumphantly. "I'll show him me vices. Then he'll walk—nay, run—cursin' the day he ever met me." Surely, that's what the Lord wanted.

Rosaleen breathed more easily, knowing she could easily scare off Mr. Cameron. Still, it puzzled her why he would have to advertise for a bride. He was a nice-enough-looking chap, so he should have no trouble finding a bride. Something wasn't quite right about this, and that was all the more reason she had to make sure he wouldn't want to marry her.

Rosaleen heard a knock at the door and knew it was Blaise Cameron. She looked into her small mirror, brushed the tears from her reddened cheeks, and patted her hair into place. She left the small cubicle with a bright smile on her lips.

Ignoring her family, for her heart ached at their deceitfulness, Rosaleen directed her attention toward Blaise, who stood just inside the cabin door. Her stomach churned with ire, but she concealed her turmoil with a charming smile. "I agree to marry ye, Mr. Cameron."

The small cabin went quiet at the sudden declaration. Rosaleen glanced at her family's shocked expressions and knew her plan would work. She turned to Blaise and noted his surprise as well. "Have ye changed yer mind already, Mr. Cameron?"

"On the contrary, Miss O'Shay. I find marrying you most appealing. Shall I call for you tomorrow to make arrangements?"

"That would be fine, sir. I'll be expectin' ye then." Rosaleen strained to keep the smile on her face, but she thought she at least fooled *him*.

With a slight nod to the O'Shays, Blaise said his goodbyes. Then he took one last bewildered look at Rosaleen and left the little cabin.

"What changed yer mind about marryin' Mr. Cameron, Rosaleen Katherine?" Maureen sounded skeptical.

Rosaleen glanced at Shawn and then at her mother. "Shawn and I had a long discussion over the matter. He explained how I'd benefit from such a marriage."

"Aye, Mama," Shawn broke in. "I told Rosaleen that Mr. Cameron was a nice lad and would make her a good husband."

"But, Rosaleen, we may never see ye again," Shannon spoke up. "I do not want ye to go so far away."

"Ye'll be comin' west soon, and I'll be waitin' for ye there, Shannon. I promise I'll write to ye often so ye'll know all about California." Rosaleen felt her throat grow tight at the thought of leaving. Oh, what was she thinking? She wasn't really leaving. She'd convince Mr. Cameron she was the wrong choice for him.

With renewed zest, Rosaleen added brightly, “Who knows, thin’s may turn out differently than what we expect.”

Without any further comments or explanation, Rosaleen went to bed.

* * * * *

Later that evening, Blaise sat in his aunt and uncle’s drawing room, staring into the fire. He leaned back into the padded chair, chuckling as he thought of the night’s events. He still couldn’t believe his good fortune—the fiery vixen was, in fact, Rosaleen O’Shay.

He closed his eyes and envisioned her long, auburn hair, her pouty mouth, and her emerald green eyes. The sound of her voice still floated through his mind.

Because he’d had several Irish men in his troop during the war, Blaise had understood a few of the Gaelic words Rosaleen had spouted. They weren’t very flattering, and he’d make a point to learn more Irish words in the future.

Was he doing the proper thing, or was Mandy right? Would his plan backfire and leave him at the mercy of the Irish lass he planned to marry, or at her father’s mercy? He hoped not, though he had his doubts about Rosaleen’s sudden change of heart. She was a sly one, and he’d have to be on his guard.

Blaise knew he should find a less ravishing wench to marry, or at least one without so much spirit. Yet, Rosaleen was the answer to his problem in many ways. Once he got her alone and explained their mock marriage, he was convinced she’d go along with the ruse. He knew she didn’t want to marry him—anyone could see that—but she had changed her mind. Her parents must have convinced her, yet they seemed surprised as well. The whole thing puzzled Blaise, but with the small farm as bait, he

felt confident she would bite. After all, she would want to see her family together in California after he had the marriage annulled. They were a poor family, new in America, and they had no responsibilities. Blaise felt lucky indeed to have found such a situation.

EIGHT



When Rosaleen woke the following morning, she decided to prepare breakfast so her mother could sleep in after a long night at the inn. However, Rosaleen soon discovered there was no food in the cabin, so she put on her shawl and headed for the company store. She reached the store and rushed to the old potbelly stove to warm her hands.

Someone called out her name, and Rosaleen turned to see Janna at the counter.

“Good mornin’, Janna. What are ye doin’ here so early?”

“I was hired,” Janna said excitedly. “Today is my first day.”

“I’m happy for ye! I hope I can be as lucky at findin’ a job.”

“Well, the pay isn’t all that grand, but I don’t have to fight off drunken men, either.” Janna smiled shyly and then giggled.

Rosaleen laughed. “I have to admit the environment is somewhat more pleasant than our last job.”

“Why do you still want to find a job?” Janna asked. “I heard you’re going to be married soon.”

Rosaleen gasped. “Who told ye that?”

After glancing around the room, Janna whispered, "Shawn told me last night."

"Shawn told ye?"

"I suppose it would be all right to tell you. Shawn and I have been seeing each other." Janna blushed a deep scarlet.

"Ye've been meetin' secretly, eh? That's wonderful."

"I never thought I'd find a man like Shawn. He's so warm and caring. I only hope he feels the same about me after tonight."

"What's happenin' tonight?"

Janna absently wiped the counter with a cloth. "I've been feeling guilty about my past. I want to be honest with Shawn, so tonight I'm telling him about Ward Masters."

Rosaleen's heart ached at the pain on Janna's pretty face. "Shawn will understand, ye will see."

"I hope you're right."

"I know me brother. He'll understand. At least ye have the advantage that he cares for ye." With a scowl, Rosaleen added, "He's not at all like the man me parents want me to marry. I cannot believe I'm to marry that blackguard that almost ran me over with his horse."

"So that's who you're marrying! I would hate to marry a man I didn't know. You have more courage than I'd have under the circumstances."

"I'm not brave, Janna, and I do not intend to marry anyone."

"I'm confused. What are you planning, Rosaleen, or should I even ask?"

"Let's just say I have no desire to wed anyone, especially Blaise Cameron."

Janna bit her lip. "Shawn says he's quite dashing."

"Looks can be deceivin'. He's arrogant and conceited, and I do not like him at all."

Janna giggled. "A match made in heaven, huh?"

“Bah! I’ll not marry that knave,” Rosaleen exclaimed, tapping her foot on the planked floor.

Janna choked down another giggle. “Calm your temper, Miss Rosaleen. It’ll get you into even more trouble than what you’re in now.”

“Trouble? Blaise Cameron doesn’t know the meanin’ of trouble yet. He’ll be sorry he ever put that cursed ad in the paper.”

“Time will tell, time will tell.” Janna shook her head, clearly enjoying Rosaleen’s misery.

“Now that ye’ve had yer fun at me expense, how about takin’ me order?”

After Janna filled the food order, Rosaleen headed toward the exit, but Janna called out to her, “I almost forgot. There’s going to be a festival day after tomorrow. Reverend Donovan called it something else, but I can’t remember what. It’s going to be for all the families who are leaving for California next week.”

“I’ll tell Mama and Da. I don’t know if Da and Shawn will be well enough for a lot of dancin’ and merriment, though.”

“Shawn is sore from the cave-in but well enough for a party.” Janna winked at Rosaleen.

When Rosaleen finally arrived home, she found Shawn sitting at the small kitchen table.

“Where have ye been?” he asked irritably.

Rosaleen placed her bundle on the table, then removed her shawl. “I went to the company store for supplies. There wasn’t a drop of food to fix for breakfast.”

“Old man Brubaker let ye charge?”

“I didn’t see Mr. Brubaker. Janna waited on me.”

“Aye, she told me she found work at the store,” Shawn said. “Janna knew she wasn’t to give us any more credit. I hope she doesn’t lose her job.”

"Janna didn't mention it to me," Rosaleen replied in astonishment.

"Nay, she wouldn't have. She's a compassionate lass."

Shawn's face lit up when he spoke of Janna.

"Are ye in love with Janna?" Rosaleen asked, starting to put away the supplies.

"Aye, Rosaleen, that I am. She came into my life and stole me heart away."

Spontaneously, Rosaleen hugged her brother. "Oh, Shawn, I'm so happy for ye both. Janna will make a ye wonderful wife, and she will truly be me sister, too."

Shawn gave Rosaleen a confused look and removed her arms from his shoulders.

With his elbows on the table, he placed his head in his palms and groaned.

"What is it, Shawn? Don't you want to marry Janna?"

"Aye, Rosaleen, more than anythin' in the world."

"Then why do ye look so sad?"

"How can I ask Janna to be me wife when I have nothin' to offer her? I cannot give her the home and security she deserves. With Da laid up, maybe for the rest of his life, I cannot leave home. I cannot ask her to come here when there are already so many hardships. It wouldn't be fair to her or Mama and Da. Ye do not know how lucky ye are to be goin' to California. Ye'll be livin' on a farm that's much larger then we ever dreamed of in Ireland."

"How do ye know that?" Rosaleen asked as she started to prepare breakfast.

"Mr. Cameron told Da and me when we first met him. He said it 'twas a wee farm of only one hundred acres. Do you realize what Da and I could do with that much land?"

Rosaleen's eyes widened. One hundred acres was indeed a

large amount of property. She wondered what the arrogant Mr. Cameron considered a sizable piece of land.

“Just think, Rosaleen, of the flocks of fat sheep and cattle one could raise on rich California pasture. Why, with that much land, I could marry Janna, build our own home, and still be able to help Da. We could work the land just the way we dreamed. Aye, lass, yer lucky.”

Rosaleen’s heart lurched with guilt at the wishful expression on Shawn’s face. She had to agree with Shawn—she was an ungrateful child. If only the offer of going to California included her family, she just might consider the marriage to Blaise Cameron. “I wish I could somethin’ to help.”

Shawn didn’t answer, and the subject was dropped.

After everyone woke and ate breakfast, Rosaleen cleaned the small kitchen as her family chattered happily at the prospects of her pending marriage. She knew she should get ready for Mr. Cameron but decided it would be best to greet him in her drab work frock. Maybe he’d be discouraged at her appearance and choose another unfortunate soul for his wife.

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Maureen noticed Rosaleen’s shabby appearance and her pleasant smile and wondered what on earth the girl had planned. The way Rosaleen had initially reacted to her parents’ plan to marry her off, Maureen had expected her daughter to be sullen and hot-tempered when Mr. Cameron arrived. She was about to question Rosaleen when she heard the sound of a horse approaching the small cabin. She looked anxiously at Rosaleen and prayed she wouldn’t cause a scene.

At the loud knock at the door, Maureen greeted Blaise and asked him in. The minute Blaise walked in the cabin wearing a

large Stetson, cowhide vest, jeans, and cowboy boots, Rosaleen's smile faded.

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Blaise found it difficult to take his eyes off Rosaleen. Her long, auburn tresses seemed to turn a burnish red when the sunlight from the window filtered across her hair. Her vivid green eyes never left him, causing his blood to surge in his veins. Her simple calico frock had seen better days, for it was old and faded, yet she was still the most beautiful woman he'd had the pleasure to meet. Blaise had to remind himself of the real reason for the marriage. He bowed his head slightly to Rosaleen, then turned to Patrick.

When he noticed the older man still in bed, Blaise's face reddened. "I'm sorry, sir, did I arrive too early?"

"Nay, laddie, do not mind me," Patrick O'Shay greeted. "There was a cave-in at the mine, but I'm better now."

"Were you injured very badly?"

"Nay. Me leg is damaged, but I'll mend. Shawn bruised some ribs, but he's up and about already."

"Patrick, do not fool yerself. Ye'll never be all right," Maureen said softly. "Ye have to accept that."

"Do not fret so in front of the lad, me darlin'. He did not come here to hear me sorrows."

"I'm sorry to hear you were hurt," Blaise said sincerely. He didn't want to pry about the extent of the older man's injuries, and now he felt even guiltier about the O'Shays' yearning to go to California. He wished there was something he could do to help them. "You're very fortunate you and Shawn didn't meet the same fate as some of the workers. I hope you were compensated for your injuries."

"Nay, laddie. In fact, I lost me job. But we're countin' our blessin's, ye can be sure."

Blaise wanted to question Patrick further, but Shawn interrupted. "Would ye like a cup of tea, Blaise?"

He needed something a bit stronger than tea but politely declined the offer.

After a few minutes of small talk, Patrick asked, "Do ye still have a mind to marry me daughter?"

Blake felt his guilt return. "Yes, sir, that's still my plan."

"Ye do not—" Rosaleen started, and then glanced at her mother. "Ye do not have to marry me, Mr. Cameron. I'm sure ye can find a more proper bride, one that can match the fortune ye obviously have. I'll not hold ye to yer promise, and I'm sure me parents wouldn't either."

Blaise noted the contempt in Rosaleen's voice and the thundering look in her eyes, so he faced her father instead. "I haven't changed my mind, and I'd like to get on with the arrangements. I have a business meeting later this afternoon."

Blaise saw Rosaleen's hands ball up into tight fists at her sides.

"Da, would it be all right if Mr. Cameron and I went for a walk? I think it would be less tryin' on us both if we got to know each other a wee bit better."

Patrick's face lit up. "That would be a fine idea, me darlin'. After ye both know each other a bit more, it'll be easier on ye."

Rosaleen seized her shawl from the peg and left the cabin, walking quickly with no particular destination in mind. Soon, she heard Blaise running to catch her, and she whirled around to face him.

"What in the blazes was that all about, Miss O'Shay?" he

demanded as he took her arm. "Are you so eager to wed me that you have to get me alone to practice your womanly wiles?"

Rosaleen glared at him. "On the contrary, Mr. Cameron, I loathe the idea of marryin' ye. Yer a vile, repulsive wretch! Ye may as well know right now, if ye force me into this marriage, ye'll wish ye had never met me. I'll never agree to this farce!"

Rosaleen trembled with anger as she tried to keep her composure. She placed her hands on her waist in a devil-may-care stance and tapped her foot on the ground.

With eyes as black as thunder, Blaise said, "I already wish I'd never laid eyes on you. Do you think I'd wed a spoiled brat like you if I had any other choice? Don't flatter yourself, Miss O'Shay. I need a wife immediately, and I don't have the luxury of waiting to find the perfect woman. I'll only need your services for a short while, and then I'll have the marriage annulled."

Rosaleen's mouth flew open in horror. Her suspicions were right! He wanted to use her and then discard her like a stray cat. Her parents wouldn't want this for her, so she now had a legitimate excuse to refuse his offer. "No thank ye, Mr. Cameron. I'm declinin' yer generous proposal. I'll not have any man use me."

Without waiting for a reply, Rosaleen turned and began walking away.

Blaise let out an exasperated sigh. "Wait just a darn minute, Miss O'Shay. The least you can do is hear me out. Since I know what your true feelings are, I can explain what I want from you."

"I'll not stand here and listen to ye any longer. I'll not agree to marry ye for any reason," Rosaleen answered curtly.

"Not even for a hundred-acre farm for your troubles?"

Rosaleen whirled around to face him. "Do ye mean as a gift?"

"Just that. All you have to do is be my wife for a few months,

and I'll deed the farm over to you."

"There has to be a catch." Rosaleen's eyes challenged him.

"The only catch is that you have to act like the loving wife in the presence of others. You're not to inform even your parents of the circumstances of our marriage. Also, never ask me any questions about it."

"It sounds like all ye need me for is a front."

"That's right, Miss O'Shay. I promise I'll not exercise my conjugal rights as a husband. Our relationship will be purely platonic. I'll sign a sworn affidavit to all of this if you wish."

Rosaleen couldn't believe her ears. He didn't want her physically, which injured her pride for some ridiculous reason she didn't understand. This was the dream her parents had always wanted. All she had to do was keep calm, and things might just work out to her benefit. "I'll do it, Mr. Cameron, only under certain conditions."

"Go on, Miss O'Shay, I'm listening."

"Number one, I'll agree if ye sign the affidavit before we're married. Number two, I also want to take me family with us. There's a wagon train leavin' in a few days, and if we hurry with the preparations, we could be on it."

Blaise removed his Stetson and ran his hand through his hair, then shook his head. "That will not be possible, Miss O'Shay. It would take too long for us to get to California by wagon train. Like I said before, I need a wife now."

Rosaleen smiled sweetly. "Then I guess there's nothin' more to discuss, Mr. Cameron. I wish ye luck in findin' a bride on such short notice." Praying she hadn't pushed the man too far, she turned to leave.

"Dang it, Miss O'Shay, stop turning your back on me. And for heaven's sake, stop acting childish. Can't you think of anyone but yourself? What about the farm your parents have always

wanted. Are you going to let them suffer because of your stubborn pride?"

"How dare ye accuse me of not thinkin' of me family! Do ye have a family, Mr. Cameron? A mother and father ye care about, or brothers and sisters? Well, put yerself in me place. Me father may never work again. Shawn wants to marry but cannot because he has to support our parents. And me mother—" Rosaleen paused as tears sprang to her eyes "—me mother works like a horse just to feed us and pay the bills. Shannon, me little sister, 'tis only twelve years old and has to cook our meals and keep the house in order.

"Now, tell me, Mr. Cameron, would ye leave yer family and go across America without carin' what happened? Ye come here a waggin' a wee bit of land before me, and I'm suppose to come a runnin'! Well, ye can go to blazes, Mr. Cameron. Ye may have never had life hard, but me clan has. We left our homeland for a better life, and I'm not goin' to leave me family after what we've went through. Ye go find yerself another wife, Mr. Cameron, because this one isn't goin'."

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Blaise's ploy to get Rosaleen to feel guilty about her family had worked, and he had seen genuine tears brighten her emerald eyes. He cleared his throat. "I understand your concern for your family, Miss O'Shay. Your family is welcome to come to Stockton if that's your wish, but I can't delay my trip any longer. Either you come with me now, or I'll have to find another bride. I'm sorry, but I've made my decision."

"And what would yer conditions be, Mr. Cameron?"

"The quickest route to California is by clipper ship. I have a friend who owns one, and I'm sure I can book our passage at a

reasonable rate. We will depart from New York and arrive in San Francisco. After that, it's a stage on to Stockton. Supplies will be purchased there. You and your family can take the wagon of supplies to the farm, and I'll meet you there."

"Why would ye want to do that?" Rosaleen looked suspicious.

"For one thing, I don't want to waste time in Stockton while your family collects their things." Blaise gave her a sharp look. "Remember, you're not to question anything I say or do."

"When would ye want to leave?"

Blaise noticed Rosaleen's brogue wasn't as thick as it had been earlier. Apparently, the madder she became, the more Irish she sounded. "The *Sea Nymph* leaves Monday morning at dawn."

"That's three days away. I'm sure we can be ready by then. How long would it take us to reach San Francisco?"

"Approximately one month by ship. It would take your family much longer if they traveled with a wagon train. They may even have time to get a crop in this year by coming with us. Also, you wouldn't have to be alone with me as a new bride."

Rosaleen blushed. "All right, Mr. Cameron, I agree. As long as I know me clan is goin' with us, I'll be safe."

"Fine. But I must warn you, Miss O'Shay, if you end our marriage for any reason you'll forfeit the farm."

"And if ye, Mr. Cameron, go back on yer word, ye'll forfeit the farm as well."

"Agreed. And another thing, no more working in a saloon. I can't keep rescuing you from drunks." Blaise winked at her.

Rosaleen's mouth flew open. "I thought it was ye when I saw ye today in yer cowboy garb."

"Yes, it was and I'd hate to think what would have happened if I hadn't interfered."

"Since we finally agree," Rosaleen said, "we'll be marryin'

day after tomorrow at one o'clock in the afternoon. We'll have a wee ceremony in our church. Until then, goodbye!"

NINE



After her heated conversation with Blaise, Rosaleen looked for a place where she could be alone. She knew that as soon as she stepped into the cabin her family would bombard her with questions, and she needed some time to think first. She ran to the first solitary place that came to her mind—a wooded glade near the coal mine. She found a concealed patch of grass near a small grove of trees, then wearily sank to the ground.

Rosaleen knew she should be happy to be making her parents' dreams come true. Then why did she feel guilty? Because the marriage to Blaise Cameron would be a sham. Her parents trusted her, and she was returning that trust with deceit. Rosaleen knew she should tell them the truth, but she couldn't for their own sakes.

She bent her head. *Dear Lord, am I makin' the right decision? Thou commandest Thy children to obey our parents, but are me parents askin' too much of me? I have faith in Thy wisdom. If this is not to be, then prevent me from makin' a terrible mistake. Aye, the land would be a blessin', but I have to keep the full truth from my parents to get it. Bless me with wisdom, Father. I cannot do*

this without Thee.

Marry a stranger? Surely, the Lord would not condone this thing. Yet, as she prayed and then searched her heart, Rosaleen felt that was just what the Lord wanted her to do. She would do as He expected, but she didn't have to like it.

"That infuriatin' Blaise Cameron!" she said aloud. "I'll show him I'm not some ignorant young lass that will grovel before him."

They may have fought the first battle together, but the war wasn't over yet. She smiled wryly. She had battle plans of her own. She'd keep her end of the bargain and be the doting wife, but only to serve her own purposes. She wanted the farm for her parents, and she'd use Blaise to get it. In a few short months, he'd be out of her life, and she'd go on as though he had never existed. With that thought, Rosaleen promised herself to go along with Blaise's conniving ruse—for her family's sake.

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Blaise climbed into his uncle's carriage and ordered the driver to return to the house.

"Blast, what have I gotten myself into this time," he said angrily to himself. Patrick O'Shay was right. His daughter possessed an evil temper! If Blaise had any sense at all, he knew he'd have forgotten the entire scheme the minute he met Rosaleen O'Shay. In a weak moment, he had agreed to let the entire O'Shay family join him on Mandy's farm.

How arrogant he'd been in thinking a wife would be the answer to his problems. Now he only hoped Rosaleen's hot temper wouldn't hinder his plans. Finding his parents was still his top priority, so how could this fiery young woman so easily dominate his thoughts?

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"What was ye thinkin', Rosaleen Katherine, by tellin' Mr. Cameron ye do not want to wed him?" Maureen O'Shay's voice echoed within the silent cabin.

Rosaleen fidgeted nervously. "What else did ye hear?"

"Nothin' else. The angry looks ye were castin' at each other proved evidence enough that ye and Mr. Cameron do not get along."

While Rosaleen was relieved her parents hadn't overheard the entire conversation, the difficult part was still to come. She would have to lie to them in order to keep her part of the bargain with Mr. Cameron. *Please, dear Lord, forgive me. I'm sayin' what I must to help me kin.*

"Yer right, Mama. We do not get along well yet. I explained to Mr. Cameron that I did not want to leave me kin. He said he understood my feelin's and said all of ye can come to California with us."

Rosaleen laughed at her family's shocked expressions. "I thought ye would all be happy at the news."

"I'm surprised at what yer tellin' us, lass," her father replied, "but we cannot go to California. It wouldn't be right to take advantage of Mr. Cameron's generosity."

"But, Da, Mr. Cameron insisted on it," Rosaleen lied. "Can ye not see all the problems it would solve if we were all to go to California? I told Mr. Cameron we'd be ready to leave when the ship sails in three days." Ignoring the stubborn look on her father's face, Rosaleen went on doggedly, "Da, ye just have to agree to go, or I will not marry Mr. Cameron."

"I do not know, lass. It wouldn't seem proper for all of us to be intrudin' upon newlyweds. Ye need to be alone to get to know each other." Patrick looked at his wife pleadingly.

“We’ll have plenty of time for that, Da. The women could share a cabin on the ship, and the men could share another. That way the cost wouldn’t be too much.”

Rosaleen watched her father’s countenance soften and decided to sweeten the pot. “Mr. Cameron says we may reach California in time to do the spring plantin’. He’ll need yer help. I’m sure the farm will be in near ruins after him bein’ gone to the war for four years. Mr. Cameron does not look too healthy, Da. Ye’d be doin’ him a favor by goin’ to California.”

“It sounds good to me, Patrick,” Maureen said. “Ye know how much ye want to go to California, and I be thinkin’ Rosaleen means what she said about not marryin’ Mr. Cameron. We wouldn’t have our daughter so far away from us, either.”

“I agree with Mama,” Shawn broke in excitedly. “We may never have this chance again, Da. Ye heard what the doctor said about ye never bein’ able to hold down a normal job. I bet ye could farm again, though. Wouldn’t it feel good to be behind a plow again instead of in a mine shaft?”

“Please, Da, say we can go,” Shannon pleaded, running to her father’s bedside.

Patrick O’Shay looked from one face to another. He was a sensible man, but Rosaleen knew he must be wrestling with his self-respect. She prayed that God would soften his pride.

“Since everyone agrees, we’ll go,” Patrick finally said. “But on one condition—that we pay Mr. Cameron back for whatever funds he spends on our trip to California.”

The family crowded around Patrick, laughing and crying.

“Do ye really mean it, Da? Are we goin’ to California?” Shannon crawled up on the bed next to her father.

“We are goin’ to California.” Mr. O’Shay glanced at Maureen. “That ’tis, if yer Mama can be ready by the time the ship sails.”

“Do not fear, me darlin’, I’ll be ready.”

"I still cannot believe we're goin'." Shawn looked at Rosaleen as though trying to read her mind

"'Tis a generous lad ye be marryin', Rosaleen Katherine."

"Aye, Mama, that he is." Rosaleen smiled and glanced away, not wanting her mother to see the truth in her face. Was Blaise Cameron being generous? Rosaleen was demanding a lot of him. The farm alone was enough for what he asked of her. Yet he agreed to let her entire family journey with them to California. Perhaps he wasn't such a bad bloke after all.

"Rosaleen, what ye be thinkin' of? Are ye thinkin' of yer beau?"

"What, Mama?" Rosaleen blushed a bright red.

"I did not mean to embarrass ye, darlin'. When are ye to be married?" Maureen asked.

"Day after tomorrow. I hoped Reverend Donovan will perform the services." Rosaleen breathed easier at the subtle shift in conversation.

"Tomorrow?" Maureen exclaimed. "So soon, lass?"

"We thought it would be for the best. We'll be leavin' for California in three days."

"Yer right, lassie. We wouldn't want ye to be goin' without a weddin' first." Maureen smiled. "'Tis the same day as the festival. We can make it a weddin' reception as well. We'll get everythin' done somehow."

"Shawn," Maureen went on, "I want ye to go to Reverend Donovan's and ask him to stop by as soon as he can. We need to start makin' all the arrangements for the weddin'."

Shawn threw Rosaleen a wink as he headed out the door. She had figured he wouldn't miss the opportunity to see Janna, and this confirmed it. Before Shawn could get too far, Rosaleen raced out the door and hurried after him.

"Shawn, wait a minute," she shouted.

He turned and waited for Rosaleen to catch up with him.

"Are ye goin' to ask Janna to marry ye tonight?" Rosaleen asked between breaths.

Shawn grinned. "Aye, me wee sister, that I am."

"I be glad to hear it, Shawn. But ye must do me a favor."

Shawn grew serious. "A favor? What are ye babblin' about, Rosaleen Katherine?"

"I know Janna loves ye. But she is goin' to be tellin' ye somethin' tonight that ye may not understand. I want ye to promise ye'll hear her out, and, for pity sake, do not get upset with her. If she knew what she was sayin' would turn ye against her, I'm afraid it would be too much for her to bear."

"What would Janna have to tell me that I'd hate her for?"

"I cannot be the one to tell ye, Shawn. And I know yer a compassionate, lovin' lad, and ye'll not hate her, but Janna is afraid ye will. Bein' the honest person she is, she has to tell ye somethin' that . . ." Rosaleen paused, biting her lip. "I cannot say any more, Shawn. Do ye promise to listen to Janna?"

"Of course I do, but ye've got me all nervous now." Shawn glared at his sister.

"Don't be nervous, Shawn. Be understandin', please." Rosaleen stood on her tiptoes and kissed her brother's cheek. Then she hurried back to the house. As she reached the door, she called, "Ask Janna if she'll be me maid of honor, Shawn."

Rosaleen watched her brother turn and wave at her, then continue toward Reverend Donovan's.

"Where did ye take off to, lass, in such a hurry?" Patrick asked Rosaleen when she entered the cabin.

"I wanted Shawn to ask Janna to be my maid of honor."

"'Tis a grand idea." Maureen smiled brightly.

"I wanted to be yer maid of honor, Rosaleen," Shannon called from their small bedroom. "I am yer sister, remember?"

Rosaleen sat down next to her sister. "Aye, my dear. I vaguely recall yer me wee sister," Rosaleen teased as she tousled Shannon's hair. "I thought ye might like to be me flower girl."

"That sounds better than a maid of honor. Do I get a pretty new dress?"

"I do not think so, darlin'," Rosaleen said gently. "I'm afraid I do not even get a new frock."

"Rosaleen is right, Shannon," Maureen interrupted. "I do not even know where we will be gettin' the money to go to California." Then she looked at Rosaleen. "Ye may not have a pretty new weddin' gown, Rosaleen, but ye will be wearin' a weddin' dress all the same. Ye can wear mine if ye be wantin' to."

"I'd rather be married in yer weddin' gown, Mama, than a brand new one." Running to her mother, Rosaleen gave her a hug and kissed her cheek.

Maureen brushed back her tears. "I be waitin' for one of me daughters to wed, so she could wear me weddin' gown. 'Tis a happy time indeed."

Rosaleen saw the look of love pass between her parents and knew they were both remembering their wedding day. Rosaleen envied the love they shared, even after twenty-seven years of marriage. She and Blaise would never feel that kind of love for one another, and, for some odd reason, this realization saddened Rosaleen.

Maybe she *shouldn't* wear her mother's wedding dress. After all, hers would be a mock marriage. But as she watched her mother carefully unfold the beautiful gown, Rosaleen knew she couldn't deny her mother this wish.

"Ye best be tryin' it on tonight, lass, in case I have to make any adjustments."

Rosaleen went behind the curtain to try on the dress. Maureen anxiously stood next to her daughter while Shannon watched

from the bed.

After she slipped the gown over her trim frame, Rosaleen stood while her mother fastened the small pearl buttons down the back.

“Do I get a peek at me daughter, wife?” Patrick said from the other side of the curtain.

“Nay, Patrick. Ye’ll have to wait until the weddin’.”

“’Tis not fair,” Patrick called. “I’m not the groom, ye know. At least tell me if it fits.”

“Aye, it fits, barely,” Maureen said as she continued fastening the small buttons. “Rosaleen is a wee larger in the bosom and a bit smaller in the waist than I was. A tuck here and a seam there, and ’twill fit just fine.”

“Are ye sure, Mama?” Rosaleen asked in alarm. She tried to pull up the bodice of the dress a bit more.

“I’m sure, lassie. Don’t worry so,” her mother said.

Shannon giggled. “I’m sure Mr. Cameron would like the dress just the way it ’tis, all fallin’ down off ye.”

“Shannon!” Rosaleen gasped. “What do ye know of such thin’s?”

“Why everyone knows what happens on the weddin’ night!” Shannon said boldly. “Do ye not know what it means to be a married woman?”

Rosaleen’s mouth flew open to scold Shannon as Patrick’s laughter filled the cabin.

“Me darlin’ Maureen, I do not know which daughter ye should be havin’ a talk with—the one that knows too much or the one that knows too little.”

Maureen mumbled something about needing to tend to their father before she lost her temper.

Shrugging her shoulders, Shannon rolled over and went to sleep, leaving Rosaleen to worry over the upcoming nuptials.

* * * * *

Shawn gave Reverend Donovan his mother's message, then walked to the McNallys' and asked Janna if she'd enjoy a short stroll before he went home. When they were a short distance from the McNallys' cabin, Shawn made small talk as he tried to summon courage to ask her what was on his mind.

"Well, Rosaleen is goin' through with the marriage to Blaise Cameron. That's why Mama wanted to see Reverend Donovan, to ask him to perform the ceremony."

"Rosaleen just told me this morning that she refused to marry him."

"She changed her mind. Ye know how Rosaleen is." Shawn laughed nervously.

"Still, she seemed very certain there'd be no wedding. Something must have happened to change her mind."

"Aye, Mr. Cameron offered to take all of us to California with them."

"California? You're going to California?"

"Aye, but I need to speak with ye, Janna." Shawn took a deep breath. "I know this isn't the proper place to be askin' ye, but I'm goin' to explode if I do not say it now."

Shawn took Janna's hands and clasped them between his.

"I do not think I'd be askin' ye this so soon, Janna. With Da laid up and no means of supportin' a family, I gave up hope of havin' ye for me own. But since Rosaleen is marryin' Blaise Cameron, and he is lettin' the family live with them in California, I can think of me dreams as well. What I'm tryin' to say, Janna, is I love ye and I want ye to be me wife."

Janna's eyes widened and her hand covered her mouth.

"Did ye hear me, Janna?" Shawn asked hesitantly. "Will ye marry me?"

Janna jerked her hands from Shawn's grasp and backed away from him. With tears streaming down her cheeks, she choked out in broken sobs, "I can't marry you, Shawn. I'm sorry."

"What do ye mean ye cannot marry me? Rosaleen said ye loved me. Are ye sayin' ye do not?"

"I do love you, Shawn," Janna said between sobs, "more than you'll ever know. But I can't marry you. I'm not who you think I am."

"Yer a beautiful, lovin' lass, Janna, innocent as a baby lamb and as sweet as a sprin' morn. I love ye and ye love me. That's all that matters."

"Innocent!" Janna cried out. "I'm not innocent, Shawn! I may not know the gentle hand of a newfound love, but I know the cruelty of a sadistic beast."

Shawn stared at Janna in bewilderment.

"That's right, Shawn. I am not pure. I was defiled repeatedly and held prisoner by a lunatic. Don't you see? I'm not fit to be your wife. A man I both fear and loathe ruined my life. Now that you know, I'll not hold you to your words of love."

Now Shawn understood Rosaleen's words of warning. But Janna's past didn't change how he felt about her. As he stood silently, trying to think of how he could convince Janna that his love for her was sincere, she bolted away. Shawn called to her to stop, but she continued to run, so he took off after her. When he caught her, he grabbed her and forced her to look at him.

"I do not blame ye for what happened, Janna. I love ye. What happened wasn't yer fault. If I were crippled in the cave-in, would ye love me any less? I wouldn't have been a whole man."

Janna wiped the tears from her cheeks. "You don't understand, Shawn. It's not the same thing. I feel dirty and cheap. I don't know if I can ever let any man touch me without feeling ill."

Shawn gathered Janna in his arms, breathing in the clean

scent of soap and fresh baked bread. "Aye, me darlin'. Ye'll feel our love when the time comes. Our love for each other will be stronger than the fears and pain ye suffered. I'll never do anythin' to remind ye of what happened. Ye cannot throw away what we feel for each other, because of what some blackguard did to ye. It isn't fair to either of us to let him win."

Love radiated from Janna's eyes, penetrating his soul.

"Are you that forgiving, Shawn?" She turned her face away. "If only I knew for sure you'd feel this way forever. What if we have children? Would you be ashamed of me, knowing what happened?"

Shawn pressed Janna's head against his shoulder and silently prayed that God would help him say the right thing. "I'll never be ashamed of ye, Janna. I'm proud of ye and always will be. Please believe me. Please trust me." Shawn fought back tears. "Be my wife, Janna. Come to California with me, darlin', where we can build new memories together. Be my love, my children's mother, my strength, and be with me always."

The Spirit must have whispered to her, for Janna smiled at Shawn, tears of joy replacing tears of pain. "Yes, my darling Shawn, I'll marry you. I'll be yours forever."

With a sigh, Shawn embraced Janna and held her tight, almost afraid she would vanish before him. He kissed her on the forehead and then kissed her tear-stained cheeks.

"Oh, Janna, we'll be happy, I promise. And we'll never speak of yer pain again."

"Never let me go, Shawn. Always keep me close to your heart."

"That's the easiest promise I could ever give ye."

TEN



Shawn squirmed in his chair as if he were about to burst, his eyes darting from one person to another at the table. Rosaleen had just opened her mouth to ask what was ailing him when he cleared his throat.

“By the way, Rosaleen, Janna asked me to tell ye she’s sorry, but she cannot be yer maid of honor.”

Rosaleen paused as she rose to clear the breakfast dishes. “Why not?”

“Well, it’s rather difficult to be a maid of honor and a bride at the same time,” Shawn replied with a grin.

Everyone stared at Shawn as the news sunk in. Then Shannon and Maureen jumped up to smother him with hugs and kisses.

“Shawn O’Shay, ye jackeen!” Rosaleen gave her brother a playful smack on the back of his head. “Ye gave me such a start!”

“Oh, Shawn, I’m so happy for ye.” Maureen had tears in her eyes as she embraced her son once more. “Janna will make ye a wonderful wife.”

“Me son married,” Patrick said from where he sat on his bed. “’Tis fine news! Janna is a bonny wee lass. The fairies are smilin’ on us this morn.”

“Now, I’ll have two sisters.” Shannon jumped up and down in excitement.

“When will ye be married?” Maureen asked.

“Janna and I were hopin’ to be married before we leave for California. We were thinkin’ of havin’ a double ceremony with Rosaleen and Blaise.” Shawn looked at Rosaleen expectantly.

“That’s a great idea, Shawn. I’m sure Reverend Donovan would be happy to perform both ceremonies,” Rosaleen said brightly.

“Aye, I’m sure he would,” Maureen said. “We could have the celebration at the *feis*—the festival. There will be much dancin’ to celebrate both occasions.”

Shannon glanced at her father. “What about Da? He cannot walk.”

“Do not trouble yerself, Shannon. I wouldn’t miss me own son’s and daughter’s weddin’s. I’ll be there.” Patrick lay back on the bed.

“Enough talkin’,” Maureen said. “We have a lot to do before tomorrow.”

With so much to accomplish in such a short time, the little cabin was soon filled with happy chaos. They had the dress to alter, the church to decorate, and the food to cook. Thank goodness other families had offered to help prepare food for the festival and the weddings.

The O’Shays could take very little with them on their journey to California, so they sold or gave away most of their belongings, including their furniture. When the packing and repacking was finally finished, Patrick promised to build all new furniture after they settled in California.

“The furniture can be replaced,” Maureen told him. “’Tis me Mama’s spinnin’ wheel I regret sellin’. We brought it all the way from Ireland.”

“Then bring it along, me darlin’. It won’t take up much space on the ship.” Patrick pulled Maureen into his arms. “I can make ye a new spinnin’ wheel but I cannot replace the memories of yer mama spinnin’ her wool with it.”

Maureen blinked away tears. “Nay, me mind is made up, Patrick. We be needin’ the space on the ship for more important thin’s.”

After everything was loaded on the McNally’s wagon, Rosaleen watched Shawn hop onto the wagon seat and snap the reins. She ran up to the wagon and motioned for him to stop. “I want a word with ye, brother.”

Shawn pulled on the reins and spoke gently to the horses. “What is it, Rosaleen? I need to be on my way.”

“I just wanted to thank ye for listenin’ to Janna last night. I take it she told ye everythin’.”

“Aye, she did. I’m grateful to ye for bringin’ her home that night.”

Rosaleen sighed. “I couldn’t leave her to the likes of Ward Masters. Someday he’ll get his just rewards for the way he hurt her.”

Shawn’s brow wrinkled. “Ward Masters? I thought he was after ye that night at the saloon.”

“Nay, ’twas Janna.”

Shawn’s face went red.

“What’s wrong, Shawn? I thought ye said Janna told ye what happened to her.”

The muscles in Shawn’s jaw flexed as he stared ahead. “She wouldn’t tell me who hurt her.” He clicked his tongue to start the horses in motion.

Rosaleen tried to grab his arm as the wagon started to move. "I'm sorry, Shawn. I thought ye knew. Ye mustn't go against Ward Masters—'tis not worth it! Ye have Janna now, and that's all that matters. Promise me ye won't do anythin' ye'll regret."

Without another word, Shawn yelled at the team and left, leaving Rosaleen standing in the middle of the road.

* * * * *

Hours later, Rosaleen stood looking out the window, heedless of the conversation between Dr. Jacobs and her parents. She worried that Shawn had gone to see Ward Masters. When Janna had come to visit earlier, Rosaleen had told her that Shawn now knew Masters had been the one to abuse and enslave her. Janna hurried to the McNallys', hoping Shawn might go there before returning home. Rosaleen knew if Shawn didn't return soon, she'd have to tell her parents what had happened.

Half an hour later, Rosaleen spotted Shawn heading towards the cabin, still driving the McNallys' wagon. She raced out the door to meet him.

"Where have ye been? I was afraid ye might have gone after Masters and were injured!"

Shawn unhitched the team. "It takes time to haggle for an honest sum for used furniture."

"Well, I'm glad yer home. Ye must go see Janna right away. She's worried about ye."

"What does Janna know about this?" Shawn snapped.

"Do not raise yer voice to me! If I'd known Janna hadn't told ye about Ward Masters, I'd have kept me mouth shut." Rosaleen glanced away, shuffling the dirt with her foot. "I told her what I said to ye."

Shawn jumped down from the wagon and faced his sister,

his eyes blazing. "I want ye to promise me, Rosaleen Katherine, not to speak of Masters to Janna ever again. He left deep scars, and I do not want her reminded of him." Shawn paused and then shook his head. "It took every bit of willpower I possess not to find Masters today and beat him, or worse. I thought about what ye said earlier and I knew ye were right. Still, I needed help from heaven above, and I prayed about it. I knew God would want me to leave thin's be. 'Tis good we're leavin' soon. Otherwise, 'twould be too hard for me to ignore Masters."

"Of course I won't speak of Masters again to Janna. I loathe him too. I hope I never set eyes on him again. 'Twill be easier for Janna when we leave."

"Then we'll let the subject drop." Shawn smiled down at his sister. "Are the McNally's still here?"

"Nay, they left some time ago. The doctor is here now to see Da."

Shawn looked anxiously at the cabin. "What has he said about Da's leg?"

"I do not know." Rosaleen shrugged. "I was too worried about ye to pay attention."

"Well, then we better find out if Da can travel," Shawn replied as he entered the small cabin.

"Yer just the man I wanted to see." Shawn shook the doctor's hand. "How is Da? Can he travel?"

"Yes, as long as he doesn't use his leg too much until it heals. I'm leaving him a pair of crutches." Then Doctor Jacobs wagged his finger at Shawn. "I want you to make sure, young man, that your father doesn't overdo it. I would hate to see him crippled for life."

"Ye do not have to worry about that, Doc." Shawn gave his father a look of warning. "I'll be watchin' him constantly."

"Good, Shawn. How are you feeling? Are your ribs giving

you any problems?"

"Nay, doc, I'm fine," Shawn said as he placed a hand over his ribs. "I'm good as new."

"Then I guess I'll be going." Turning to Patrick, Dr. Jacobs cautioned, "You can remove the splint in six to eight weeks, but remember, the bone will take a while to heal completely. I don't want to hear you ignored my warning."

"Do not worry, doctor," Patrick said with a grin. "Me family has a farm awaitin' us in California. I want to be well enough to heal. I will not be takin' any chances."

"I'm sure your family will see to it you don't." Dr. Jacobs laughed as he headed for the door.

After the doctor left, Shawn handed his father a worn leather pouch. "This is the money I got for the furniture, Da. 'Tis not much, but with so many clans goin' west, Pittsburgh is filled with used merchandise. The shopkeeper was impressed with yer workmanship, so he gave me a fair price."

Patrick opened the pouch and smiled. "Then we're ready to leave for California. I'm proud of ye, laddie. Ye did well with yer da all laid up. I'm itchin' to get to California and start the plantin'." With the help of his new crutches, Patrick headed for the door. "Come on, laddie."

"Now, Patrick, ye heard what the doctor said," Maureen protested.

"I'll be fine, me darlin'. We're just goin' to see a few comrades. We'll be home before dinner."

"Do not worry, Mama. I'll be with him," Shawn said as he opened the door for his father.

Maureen shook her head as she watched father and son leave.

"Well, Rosaleen lass, we best be gettin' dinner started."

"How are we goin' to get by with no furniture?" Rosaleen

looked around the bare room. The only furniture left was the tick mattresses they slept on.

Rosaleen would miss the beautiful wardrobe her father had made for her and Shannon. The hand-carved highboy that matched her parents' four-poster bed was gone now, along with the table and chairs. Even the small cherry-wood stands had been sold. Her mother had wept silently when Shawn took away her rocking chair, her spinning wheel, and her china, all of which she had brought from Ireland.

"Do not worry, lass," Maureen said, bringing Rosaleen's thoughts back to the present. "We'll be fine. 'Tis worth it all to see yer da so happy. I'll have to get used to goin' without me thin's about me until I get to California. Then yer da can make me more furniture."

"I admire yer bravery, Mama."

"I'm not brave. Ye are the brave one. Yer marryin' a stranger, after all."

"Bah! 'Tis nothin', Mama. I'll be fine as long as I know ye and Da are with me."

Maureen embraced her eldest daughter. "'Tis a dream come true, lass. I never thought we'd leave Pittsburgh. We'll be back on a farm again! 'Tis yer and Mr. Cameron's home, but we'll be in California where we'll be able to have a farm of our own someday."

Rosaleen wished she could tell her mother that the farm was in fact theirs, but she couldn't. It would have to keep until Blaise annulled the marriage.

"I have faith ye'll have yer farm before ye know it."

"Well, enough talk of the future," Maureen said with a sigh. "We have dinner to make."

After they prepared the meal, Rosaleen and Maureen waited for the men to return. Shannon was due home any minute from a

friend's house.

Maureen sat down next to Rosaleen on the hearth. "I do not want to embarrass ye, lass, but I think we should have a wee talk before everyone comes home." Maureen wrung her hands nervously. "Tomorrow 'tis yer weddin' day, and there are thin's ye should know. Ye have to understand Mr. Cameron will be yer husband, and ye will have to act accordin'ly. 'Tis goin' to be extra hard for ye, seein' as how ye do not know him."

"I was havin' the same fears, Mama," Rosaleen interrupted. "If ye remember, I said I never wanted to get married. The last time I spoke to Mr. Cameron I told him me fears, and he agreed we'd wait until I was ready to, ye know . . ." Rosaleen bit her lip. "So please do not worry about me."

Her mother sighed in relief. "I feel much better knowin' ye'll not be forced to do somethin' yer not ready for. I told ye Mr. Cameron is a nice man. I know yer not in love with him, but in time, ye will be. Ye'll look back on all this and laugh—ye'll see. I do not think ye'll have too hard of a time fallin' in love with him. He's a handsome lad even if he isn't Irish. Just remember, lass, he'll have to get used to ye, also. Do not be so stubborn and difficult. A tree must bend both ways or 'twill snap. Ye must be understandin' to his feelin's also."

At the serious look on her mother's face, Rosaleen swallowed a laugh. *Blaise Cameron has feelings? Bah!* She knew she would never fall in love with that rascal, handsome or not. But her mother was right about a tree, and this one would definitely break.

"Ye heed me warnin's, Rosaleen Katherine. Marriage is sacred and must be taken seriously."

"I'll listen to yer advise, Mama, but do not expect miracles overnight," Rosaleen said softly and placed a kiss on her mother's cheek.

"I'll bet by the time we arrive in California ye'll be so

much in love ye'll thank yer da and me for findin' ye such a fine husband."

Suddenly, loud whooping and shouting sounded outside the cabin. Before they could get to the door, Shannon ran in. "'Tis Da and Shawn. Paddy Fahy is with them in a wagon. They want ye to come and see."

Rosaleen and her mother exchanged puzzled looks, then hurried outside.

"Look who we found at the store, Maureen. 'Tis Paddy Fahy. He be wantin' ye to see their new wagon. 'Tis a beaut', isn't it?"

"Aye, Patrick." Maureen stared wondrously at the wagon. "'Twill work out fine, I be thinkin', Paddy."

"That it will, Mrs. O'Shay. You should see the inside. Me mother is quite fortunate to be havin' such a nice wagon to take to California. They're quite hard to find in Pittsburgh, with the war just over."

"Did ye pay a fair price for it?" Maureen asked as she helped her husband climb down from the wagon seat.

"Aye, that we did. All the gear and horses came with it, includin' the water barrows."

"I'm happy for yer clan, Paddy. I'm a hopin' ye'll homestead near us."

"Me parents haven't decided where we'll settle yet." Paddy glanced miserably at Rosaleen, who quickly looked away.

"Did ye tell Mama what was inside, Da?" Shawn asked eagerly.

"Nay, laddie." Patrick winked at his son. "I'll be showin' her now."

After giving her husband and son a questioning look, Maureen opened the canvas flaps at the rear of the wagon. "*Arrah!* Me spinnin' wheel! Why did ye not sell it, Shawn?" She reached inside the wagon and lovingly touched the wheel.

"I couldn't sell it, Mama, not knowin' how much it meant to ye. I was afeared ye'd get mad at me, so I was goin' to tell ye once we were aboard the ship. Da said I should tell ye now. Are ye vexed with me, Mama, for not sellin' it?"

"Nay, me darlin' son." Maureen smiled through misty eyes. "We'll take it to California."

* * * * *

Blaise wanted to wring his uncle's neck. In an attempt to cool his temper, he paced the small office, occasionally casting an ominous look in Henry Cameron's direction. He could almost hear the old man shuddering in fear. When he'd met the O'Shays, Blaise was reminded how his father had treated the miners with respect. Now the miners were no more than beggars. Something was wrong, and Blaise knew it started with his greedy uncle.

Henry Cameron wiped his forehead with his handkerchief and then reached for a decanter of brandy. "Please, Blaise, see my side of this distasteful situation. I can't afford to give all of those miners and their families compensation for what happened. I'm losing money as we speak. Why, the mine shaft has to be cleared and new timbers set before I can even turn another dollar. I can't give in to a bunch of sniveling women with a brood of brats hanging on their skirts. That's not how to conduct business. Besides, most of the miners are just immigrants. Why, the Irish should be grateful I hire them in the first place. No one else will."

Blaise watched his uncle pour himself a drink. With two long strides, he crossed the room and banged his hands on his uncle's desk, causing Henry Cameron to nearly choke on the brandy. Then Blaise leaned over the desk and glared into the man's startled eyes.

"I don't care how much money you're losing, Uncle Henry.

What you're doing to those families is the same as slavery. I saw how they live—the shacks you rent to them. If that's not enough, you take the rest of their pay at the company store."

"Now you've gone too far, Blaise. I don't force those miners to work for me. They can quit any time they want to. I'm appalled at such a comment." Henry set the empty glass down with trembling fingers.

Blaise stood straight again, a wry smile playing on his lips. "You're quite right, Uncle Henry. You don't force them to work for you, but poverty does. Have you ever been so poor you'd do anything to feed your family? Have you ever been so hungry you'd swallow your pride and work under such harsh conditions as you force on your workers?"

"Of course not. I've always provided for my family, and, I might add, your sister, while you've been away at war. I made something of myself and so can those miners if they really want to."

Blaise's bitter laugh caused Henry to cower in his chair. "And just where did you get the money for your investments, Uncle Henry, and the money for your fine house and carriages? Seems to me my father had a helping hand in getting you where you are today.

"In fact, my father owns most of the shares in the mine, doesn't he? What would my father, your brother, say about you cheating innocent people out of their compensation? Some of those dead miners left families behind. Others will never work again."

Henry Cameron's fingers trembled as he tried to wipe away the sweat beads that formed above his upper lip. "Now, see here, Blaise"—he cleared his throat—"you can't blackmail me into paying out thousands of dollars to those families. With your father missing, I have full power to make decisions concerning

the mine. Besides, who told you all of this? Your main concern has always been the ranch."

Blaise pulled up a chair and sat down. "That may have been true until now."

"What do you mean until now?"

"Father may have left conditions in his will concerning the ranch, but, as Mr. Withers just informed me, I have controlling power over the mine in his absence or death. I might also remind you, Uncle Henry, I can take your job away from you. You're a mere employee, just like the men who work in the mines."

Blaise knew he had hit home as he watched the blood drain from his uncle's face. "You can either work here in this nice, warm office and live in your fancy house, or you can join the rest of the employees in the run-down cabins on the edge of town. It's your choice. I won't force you to work for me."

Henry Cameron's lower lip protruded in a pout. "Mr. Withers had no business poking his nose into my affairs."

"Well, why don't you tell him that when you hand in your resignation? I'm sure he'll be more than happy to oversee the mine for me while I'm in California. Whether you stay or not is of no consequence to me. Mr. Withers will be more than happy to take more of an interest in the mine operation."

Henry's face blanched. "Are you saying you don't trust me? I assure you, I've always had your father's best interest in mind." Then he tried to smile. "If it means that much to you, I'll compensate the miners and their families. Tell me what is fair and I'll have the bank issue the money."

Blaise rose from the chair. "I'll let Mr. Withers handle this matter before I leave town. He'll be watching over you until Father returns. In the meantime, I want the mine shafts fitted with new timbers and whatever else needs to be done for the safety of the workers."

Henry placed his head in his hands and slouched over the desk, mumbling, "All of this over that Irish trash he's marrying."

"What did you say? Speak up, man, so I can hear you."

"I'll do whatever you ask, Blaise."

Blaise wasn't convinced by Henry Cameron's sudden efforts at integrity, but Mr. Withers promised to keep an eye on things once Blaise left for California. After all, Blaise didn't care about the money the mine made, other than making sure the workers received compensation for their losses. Blaise's love had always been the ranch.

ELEVEN



“Rosaleen, wake up,” Shannon repeated for the third time. “Mama said ye have to get up now.”

Rosaleen heard her sister’s pesterings but feigned sleep. She knew if she arose, she’d find the last two days were true and not merely a bad dream.

This is my weddin’ day, supposedly the happiest day of my life! Perhaps if she refused to rise, everything would go away.

“Rosaleen Katherine, I know yer awake.” Shannon shook Rosaleen’s shoulder. “Ye better get up before Mama loses her temper.”

When Rosaleen continued to ignore her, Shannon started jumping up and down on the mattress.

Rosaleen finally relented. “All right, ye rascal. I’ll get up. Would ye please stop jumpin’ before I be gettin’ sick?”

“I’m tellin’ on ye, Rosaleen Katherine, for speakin’ the Irish brogue. Ye know Mama doesn’t like ye sayin’ it.”

“I be hearin’ for meself, Shannon,” Maureen replied from

the other side of the curtain. "Come out of there so yer sister can get up."

"But Mama—"

"Shannon!"

"Oh, all right, I'm comin'."

Rosaleen looked up at the ceiling. How she wished she were Shannon, with no great burdens or responsibilities for the family. With a helpless sigh, Rosaleen covered her head, hiding from the inevitable.

"That is not goin' to help ye, Rosaleen Katherine," Maureen said ruefully. "Ye cannot hide from yer own weddin'. Ye might as well get up and start preparin' for it."

Rosaleen folded back the quilts and then looked at her mother beseechingly. "I'm not feelin' well."

"Ye've just got the pre-weddin' jitters, lassie. Most brides and grooms get them. But if ye be havin' second thoughts, 'tis the time to say."

Again, Rosaleen's heart filled with guilt at her parents' plight. "Nay, Mama. I'm just nervous. I'll be fine."

"If yer sure, lassie, then I'll prepare yer bath. 'Tis late, so ye best hurry."

After groaning and stretching, Rosaleen finally forced herself out of bed. "I hope Blaise Cameron is feelin' as miserable as I am," she said under her breath. "If not, he will before the day is over." At the thought of Blaise suffering, Rosaleen smiled and felt somewhat better.

Blaise paced the floor in the drawing room like a caged animal, his stomach twisted in a tight knot. "Blast, I wish I could think of a way to find Mother and Father other than marriage."

"This was your idea, remember," Amanda replied from the settee. "If you're determined to find Mother and Father on your own, why not just confront Lance Kincaid and finish it?"

"That would be a sure way of getting Mother, Father, and myself killed." Blaise said with more agitation than he intended. "I have to be close enough to the ranch that I can get Mother and Father out before I try to regain the ranch."

"Blaise, I'm not exaggerating about Lance having a lot of men on the ranch. Believe me, they'll do anything he tells them."

"Don't worry, Mandy, I have the advantage of the first play."

"I don't understand."

"Kincaid doesn't know when I'm coming. I intend to find out as much as I can about him and his operation before he realizes I'm a threat. No one in Stockton knows Jonas, so I'll have him hired at the Buckshot Ranch as a ranch hand. Hopefully, he can find out where Mother and Father are being held."

"Lance Kincaid is a sympathizer for the South," Amanda said in an ominous tone. "Since Jonas is a freed black, he may be in for a lot of abuse."

"Don't worry. Jonas can handle a lot more than you realize. Besides, he won't have to stay there long. I have a few tricks up my sleeve."

Amanda watched Blaise refill his glass with brandy. "Don't you think you've had enough to drink, Blaise?" she asked cautiously. "You don't want to be drunk at your own wedding, do you?"

"Drinking seems to be my only solace lately. Don't begrudge me that."

"I'm only concerned."

Blaise would not show his fear. Everyone depended on him, and he would somehow make sense of things and find his parents. "Don't be concerned, Amanda." He placed the decanter of brandy

down. "I'll slow the drinking down, I promise."

"I hope so." Amanda rose from the settee. "Well, I'm going to prepare myself for the wedding—"

"Wait a minute." Blaise grabbed her arm. "You're not going to the wedding, and neither are Aunt May and Uncle Henry."

"What do you mean we're not going? Of course I'm going to see my only brother wed!"

"No, you're not! Have you forgotten this marriage is merely a formality to find our parents?"

"What a terrible thing to say, Blaise Cameron. This marriage may be a formality to you, but it's still a marriage before God. It's not fair for you to ignore your family this way."

"I'm not ignoring you, Mandy," Blaise said, softening a bit. "I just don't want you getting personally involved, because this marriage isn't for keeps. It wouldn't be fair to you if I let you meet the O'Shays. It would just complicate things."

"Who do you think you're fooling, Blaise Cameron? You're not afraid I'll complicate matters. You're afraid I just might like this Irish lass you're going to marry. Heaven help you if I did because I'd make sure you didn't get out of the marriage so easily."

Blaise shrugged his shoulders, but his apathy seemed to only anger Amanda more.

"I can't believe how cold you've become, Blaise. Don't you have feelings anymore?"

"Why are you trying to make me feel guilty? I'll reward the twit sufficiently for her services."

"You're heartless!"

Blaise felt an inward cringe at the insult he had aimed at Rosaleen. How could he explain his feelings to Amanda concerning Rosaleen when he couldn't figure them out himself? The last thing he needed was to become romantically involved

with someone who detested him.

Amanda stood defiantly before her brother. "Well, are you going to answer me?"

"I'm sorry, Mandy." Blaise tried to focus on the question. "I'm giving her the old farm house and one hundred acres for her trouble."

"My farm?"

"Yes, your farm. That's all I had to offer." Blaise felt a pang of guilt. "I'm sorry, Mandy. I should've asked you first, but with so much on my mind, I forgot."

"I don't care about the farm, Blaise, but you'll learn you can't buy people like cattle. You're just like Father. The almighty Camerons get what they want even if they have to buy a few souls on the way."

What did Amanda know of the sacrifices their father had made to ensure their future? "That's not fair, Amanda—"

"I don't want to hear it, Blaise," she cut in. "One day you'll push someone too far, and when you do, I hope you're man enough to admit your errors. I love you and Father very much. I just wish you both could show a little more compassion."

Amanda turned to leave. "I wouldn't be surprised if this Irish lass of yours will be the one to teach you a lesson."

Blaise stared dumbstruck as his sister stormed out the door. Amanda never lost her temper. Had he gone too far? After all, Rosaleen was getting what she wanted out of the deal. "I won't let Mandy make me feel guilty," he said to himself. "I'm doing the only thing I can do."

Blaise considered asking God for advice but then reminded himself he wasn't a praying man.

The morning passed quickly for Rosaleen as she prepared for the wedding. With her mother's assistance, she bathed in honeysuckle water and brushed her auburn tresses until they shone. Maureen piled the heavy mane on top of Rosaleen's head, allowing several ringlets to cascade to her shoulders. Once she carefully donned the antique wedding gown and veil, Rosaleen was ready.

Maureen stepped back to eye her handiwork. "Yer beautiful, lassie. I only wish ye had finer undergarments." She sighed as she tucked the strap of Rosaleen's chemise under the bodice of the dress. "Yers are near threadbare. Mr. Cameron will think ye are a marryin' him for his money." Maureen paused. "I wish we had the money for a trousseau. I'm sorry, Rosaleen."

Rosaleen kissed her mother on the cheek. "Do not worry about me clothes, Mama. I'm sure Mr. Cameron will not even notice." Rosaleen bit her tongue, realizing her mother might take the statement the wrong way. How she would love to ease her mother's fears and tell her Blaise Cameron would never see what she wore under her clothes.

"Yer right, lass. Mr. Cameron will have eyes for somethin' more than yer chemise and pantaloons." Maureen giggled.

Blushing, Rosaleen cleared her throat.

"I almost forgot," Maureen said. "Ye need somethin' blue and somethin' borrowed."

Rosaleen was relieved at the change of topic. "I have a blue garter. Would that be all right?"

"Aye, that would be fine, lass. Now for somethin' borrowed. Oh, I know! Ye can wear me mother's necklace."

Maureen unclasped the necklace from her own throat and gently placed it around her daughter's neck. "Now all ye need is somethin' new." Maureen brushed away tears from her own eyes.

"'Tis not necessary, Mama. We haven't the money for such

foolishness. 'Tis just an old woman's tale to have somethin' old, somethin' new, somethin' borrowed, and somethin' blue."

"'Tis not an old tale, Rosaleen Katherine." Maureen gasped. "Yer goin' to anger the fairies and brin' bad luck on yerself."

Rosaleen had been raised on stories about leprechauns and fairies, for the Irish were very superstitious.

"It so happens I already have somethin' new for ye." Maureen smiled, handing Rosaleen a package wrapped in brown paper and tied with string.

Rosaleen unwrapped the package and found a pair of lovely white shoes. She squealed with glee, then hugged her mother and quickly slipped on the shoes.

"Oh, Mama, they're beautiful!"

"Yer Da and me thought ye'd like them. I thought about buyin' ye new undergarments but decided shoes were more important."

"I'm happy ye did, Mama, but ye need to save yer money for when ye get to California."

"I'll not hear it, lass. 'Tis not every day me daughter gets married."

Rosaleen felt a lump form in her throat. She didn't deserve her parents' kindness.

"Here's a penny to place in yer shoe for good luck," Maureen said, interrupting Rosaleen's musings.

I'll need it, Rosaleen thought as she took the coin and placed it inside her shoe.

Maureen went to the door and summoned the rest of the family. "Rosaleen is ready now."

"'Tis about time," Shawn mumbled. "We're goin' to be late for our own weddin's if we do not hurry."

"Don't fret so," Maureen said soothingly. "Shannon hasn't returned from the McNallys', so Janna must not be ready either."

"I cannot understand what takes women so long to dress. While Rosaleen's been gettin' ready, we packed the wagon and got everythin' ready to go to California."

"Ye better get used to it, laddie." Patrick hobbled through the door. Then he saw Rosaleen and smiled. "'Tis worth it, I be thinkin'."

"Do I look all right, Da?" Rosaleen asked nervously.

"I've never seen a bonnier bride," he replied, then winked at his wife. "Except for yer mother, of course."

Before anyone had time to comment, Shannon burst through the front door on a dead run. She took a few big gulps of air and then said, "Janna and the McNallys are on the way to the church!"

A hard knot formed in Rosaleen's stomach, and she thought she might throw up. She took a deep breath and brushed the loose tendrils from her cheeks, noticing her face was warm and clammy. *Please, Lord, she prayed silently, let me get through this ordeal. I must go through with it. There's no turnin' back.*

It didn't take the O'Shay family long to finish the last of the packing and be on their way. Soon, Rosaleen's parents ushered her into the back of the church, where Janna and Mrs. McNally waited. Rosaleen's father and mother commented on how beautiful the brides were, but Rosaleen knew she lacked one very important ingredient for a happy bride. The love on Janna's face was absent in her own.

When the music started in the chapel, Janna and Rosaleen looked at each other for courage. With a kiss from Maureen and Mrs. McNally, the two brides were left in Patrick's care.

"Are ye ready, lassies?" Patrick glanced from Rosaleen to Janna.

"You two go first, and I'll follow," Janna said.

"Who will be givin' ye away, lass?"

“I had no one to ask, Mr. O’Shay, so I’ll just follow you and Rosaleen.”

“Nonsense. Ye both be me daughters. I’ll give ye away as well.”

When Janna started to protest, Rosaleen shook her head. “Don’t argue with an O’Shay, Janna, for it’s no use. Now come on, or Da will keep us here until ye agree.”

Janna giggled nervously and placed her arm in the crook of Patrick’s arm. He smiled from one bride to the other as he led them into the chapel and they started down the aisle.

Rosaleen’s stomach lurched when she saw all her parents’ friends in attendance. Then she saw Paddy Fahy and wanted to hide behind her father. Paddy had loved her for years, and now she found herself marrying a Yank she hardly knew. How would she ever explain that one? If the expression on Paddy’s face weren’t bad enough, Rosaleen looked up at her fiancé, who stood near the pulpit. Blaise’s phony smile and the pretend adulation smeared across his features made him look downright ridiculous.

When they reached the front of the chapel, Janna stood next to Shawn, and Rosaleen took her place beside Blaise. Her heart hammered in her breast and she knew everyone must be able to hear it. She tried to keep her breathing as normal as possible, but small, nervous gasps escaped at regular intervals.

When Blaise took her arm, the fragrance of bay rum engulfed her, causing her senses to reel. She felt her face blush when she heard Blaise say, “I do.” She could barely speak when it was her turn to repeat the sacred words.

When the reverend pronounced each couple husband and wife, Rosaleen realized she would now be kissing Blaise for the first time. The thought made her both nervous and excited. Her gaze locked with his and she closed her eyes in anticipation. But instead of a real kiss, Rosaleen felt only a gentle peck on the cheek. She

stepped back and stared at Blaise, who gave her a sardonic grin and turned to greet the well-wishers rushing toward them.

Rosaleen felt humiliated at Blaise's rejection. For appearance's sake, he could have at least *pretended* to be a happy groom.

As the well-wishers left to mingle outside, Rosaleen's parents approached the newlyweds. "May the Lord bless both yer unions," Patrick said, kissing the brides and shaking the grooms' hands.

Maureen wiped the tears from her eyes with a handkerchief. "Me darlin' children married. The good Lord has blessed us this day."

Rosaleen's only joy was making a dream come true for her family. How wonderful it would be if she were also marrying for love!

"A penny for yer thoughts, Rosaleen Katherine."

"I'm sorry, Mama, I did not hear ye."

"Ye were smilin', lassie. I'm thinkin' yer indeed happy this day." Maureen embraced her daughter.

Rosaleen's face suddenly felt warm. She was relieved when her father spoke to Blaise.

"Blaise, lad, we'll see ye and Rosaleen at the feis."

"Excuse me, sir?" Blaise's brows crinkled. "What is that?"

Patrick laughed. "I'm sorry, lad. We're havin' a festival outside of town. You know—where the wagon train is gathered. I must see me daughter dance on her weddin' day." Then he glanced at Janna and added, "Actually, both daughters."

Rosaleen started to follow her parents as they left the chapel with Janna and Shawn, but she felt a tug on her arm. She turned to see Blaise glaring at her.

"Where are you going, Miss O'Shay?"

"Ye could at least call me Rosaleen now that we're married," Rosaleen whispered angrily. "Or do ye enjoy embarrassin' me in

front of me clan and friends?" Rosaleen didn't feel like sparring with Blaise, but his arrogant tone spurred her anger.

Blaise glanced around them and said quietly, "You know the circumstances behind this marriage. I'll only be congenial when the occasion demands it."

Rosaleen paused, trying to calm herself, then glanced around to make sure no one could overhear them. "I'm goin' to the feis, Mr. Cameron. Ye can come or stay. 'Tis no matter to me."

"*Feis*? Why in tarnation can't you speak English?" Blaise's voice grew louder. "I can't understand you when you speak in that cursed brogue and use those foreign words."

"Why, ye blackguard! 'Tis a shame ye do not like me speech, but is too late to be sayin' anythin' now. I be thinkin' I'm yer wife, regardless if we like it or not. Ye keep yer insults to yerself or—"

"Or what, Miss O'Shay?" Blaise challenged.

"Miss O'Shay?" another voice said in dismay.

Rosaleen and Blaise both turned around to see Paddy Fahy. The young man stared at them. "Do ye not think it would be more proper if ye call yer wife by her given name and not by her maiden name?"

"Why, Paddy, *leannan*. I did not see ye standin' there. How kind of ye to come to me weddin'."

"So ye call me sweetheart in the Irish, eh, now that yer married?" Paddy smiled mockingly. "Ye wouldn't marry me, but ye'll marry a stranger who calls ye Miss O'Shay?"

"Ye should know how Yanks are, Paddy. They're a wee bit backward. He'll come around. Won't ye, Blaise, darlin'?" Rosaleen gazed sweetly into Blaise's smoldering eyes. She wanted to laugh when he rolled his eyes, but she constrained herself.

"I'm trying, Miss, er—I mean Rosaleen," Blaise said with a forced smile.

“Are ye goin’ to the feis, or will ye be hurryin’ to start yer honeymoon?” Paddy asked, giving Blaise a sour look.

“Aye, we’ll be goin’ to the festival,” Rosaleen answered before Blaise could say otherwise. “We’re leavin’ dawn tomorrow morn for California. We want to spend as much time with our friends as possible.”

“It would be nice if yer clan traveled with everyone else on the wagon train.”

“Aye, but Blaise has urgent business, so we cannot dally with the wagon train.”

“’Tis a pity. The trip would’ve been more pleasurable with ye along, Rosaleen.”

“Is yer clan goin’ to the feis, Paddy?” Rosaleen changed to a safer topic, feeling like such a fool flirting with Paddy just to make Blaise jealous.

“Aye, that we are. Well, I best be goin’.” Paddy smiled at Blaise and then bent over and kissed Rosaleen soundly on the mouth. “I had to kiss the bride.” He glanced back at Blaise with a murderous expression. “Congratulations, Mr. Cameron. Ye best take good care of Rosaleen, or ye’ll be answerin’ to me.”

“Insolent whelp,” Blaise mumbled as he watched Paddy’s retreating form.

“Well, are ye comin’ or not?” Rosaleen asked impatiently.

Blaise ran his hand through his hair. “I think I’ve seen enough. I’ll meet you at the train station in the morning.”

“’Twill not look good, ye not comin’ with me. After all, this is our weddin’ day. We have to appear as a normal married couple even if we do not like it, remember?”

Blaise sighed. “All right, but I can’t stay long. I have a lot to do before I leave Pittsburgh.”

Without further comment, Rosaleen left to find her family.

* * * * *

As Blaise waited outside of the church for Rosaleen, he glanced around. For the first time in his life, he felt out of place. The Irish were a happy lot, but somehow he didn't fit in.

Perhaps his attire—a black, double-breasted frock coat with silk lapels and matching trousers—made him feel out of place. The Irish were in complete contrast. The men were dressed in white tweed jackets and homespun trousers. Some wore colored wool girdles, tartan coats, and kilts, displaying their clan's colors. The women all wore woolen shawls with red or green woolen skirts, which seemed to be favorite Irish colors. Blaise admired these poor, proud people and secretly wished they accepted him. Why should it matter? He probably wouldn't see any of them after today, anyway. The thought saddened him.

He looked around impatiently, hoping Rosaleen would hurry. He needed to take care of Jonas's passage. Then there was the matter of his uncle. Something didn't feel right, but he couldn't put his finger on it. No matter how much he worried about what his uncle was up to, he still needed to start for California.

When Blaise finally saw Rosaleen coming toward him, his pulse quickened. She looked beautiful in her wedding gown. After sitting for hours in dressmakers' shops in London and Paris with his mother and sister, Blaise considered himself well versed in ladies' fashions.

The Irish lace and inlaid pearls attested to the quality design of the gown. The outdated style, most evident in the empire waist, verified that the gown was indeed a family heirloom.

Blaise looked up as Janna and Shawn departed in a wagon decorated with streamers and tin cans tied to the back. The love evident on their faces gave him a pang of jealousy, and he suddenly felt cheated. His mock marriage to Rosaleen would

never develop into anything permanent. Why did he daydream it would be otherwise? What power did the O'Shays have over him, one of them in particular.

His attention was drawn back to Rosaleen as she approached him.

"Are ye ready to go, Blaise?" she asked politely.

He looked at her heart-shaped face and limpid eyes. "Of course, darling. Whenever you're ready, we'll leave."

Rosaleen's cheeks turned a bright red, but she allowed him to place her hand in the hollow of his arm and escort her to his carriage.

Once they were on their way to the wagon-train camp, Rosaleen scowled at Blaise. "What was that all about?"

"What, darling?" Blaise feigned innocence.

"That!" Rosaleen said. "One minute ye cannot stand to be around me, and the next yer speakin' sweet endearments."

Blaise kept his eyes on the road. He didn't dare look at Rosaleen—not in his present mood. She was too darn pretty. His Irish rose could easily snare him, and that wasn't in his plans . . . not yet, anyway. "Didn't you say earlier that we had to put on a show whenever we were around people? Well, that's what I'm doing."

"'Rosaleen' is fine. Ye do not have to sweet-talk me."

"You accepted it well enough from Paddy Fahy. Is he better than your husband?" Blaise could have bit his tongue for sounding jealous, but Rosaleen had a way of getting under his skin.

"That's not the same thin', and ye know it."

"For not being the same, you sure accepted his kiss readily enough." Blaise knew he was asking for trouble, but his pride wouldn't let him ignore her barb.

"At least he does not kiss me on the cheek," Rosaleen said smugly. "What did ye expect me to do, anyway?"

Blaise pulled back hard on the reins, stopping the carriage abruptly. Rosaleen reeled forward and nearly flew out of her seat. He clutched her by the shoulders and hungrily seized her lips with his own.

Rosaleen fought against him at first, but then Blaise felt her body respond as her arms wrapped around him like a warm quilt.

Suddenly realizing his folly, Blaise pulled his mouth from Rosaleen's and released her. With a laugh at her dreamy expression, he said, "Now let Paddy beat that kiss, *Mrs. Cameron.*"

Enraged at Blaise for what he had done, and even angrier at her own body's betrayal, Rosaleen shrieked. "Why ye swine! How dare ye treat me like a harlot." She pulled back her arm and swung it around to smack him.

"Ta ta, I can't have you striking your loving husband." Blaise calmly seized her arm in mid-swing. "What would your family think?" He smiled and waved at the O'Shays as they passed the motionless carriage. After they were out of hearing range, Blaise said, "You had that coming, and you know it. You got just what you wanted. You're just upset because you enjoyed it. By the way, when is kissing your own wife treating her like a tramp?"

"Why you conceited *mealltair!*" Rosaleen tried to wrench her arm free.

"I don't know what you keep calling me, but I'm sure it's an insult. You either stop this childish behavior or we'll stay here until you do." He grinned. "Unless you want more of the same treatment I just gave you."

"Ye can go to the *deabhol!*"

"I'm warning you, Rosaleen, give it up. My pride can't take any more abuse."

Rosaleen wanted to slap the smile from Blaise's face. She clamped her mouth shut, biting her tongue until her eyes watered. She was the one whose pride had been bruised. No one had bested her in an argument before.

Blaise released her arm and she slid as far away from him as possible on the wooden bench. She heard him chuckle as he urged the horses forward.

When they arrived at the festival, Blaise stopped the carriage next to the O'Shays' wagon. Shawn and Patrick waved at them as they watered the horses. It took every bit of discipline Rosaleen could muster to allow Blaise to help her from the carriage.

She approached her father while Blaise tended to his horses. "Da, where's Mama and Janna?"

"They're in the tent." Patrick pointed to a tent a few yards away. "They're changin' their clothes so they can help with the food. Why don't ye go with yer mama? Blaise can stay with us."

Rosaleen looked at Blaise. "Is that agreeable with ye?"

He nodded his head and threw the harness to the ground. "Sure. I'll tend to the horses and then have your father and Shawn show me around. I'll catch up with you later."

Rosaleen refused to let her squabbling with Blaise spoil her fun at the festival. She left him with her father most of the afternoon while she helped the women prepare the food and set it out on long tables. There was smoked mutton pie, stewed beef, and grouse stuffed with wild cranberries. Giant pots were filled with Irish stew—layers of potatoes, onion, carrots, and pieces of tender juicy lamb. Caulcannon, a dish made of mashed potatoes, parsnips, and onions, and boiled salt pork with cabbage and potatoes, were favorites most of the festival goers hadn't tasted since they left their homeland.

For dessert, there were cream crowdies, ginger cakes, sugary nutmeg cakes, homemade ice cream, and, of course, flaky shortbread made with fresh butter. Potato candy filled with peanut butter was a favorite among both the young and the old.

Most of the Irish families hadn't eaten this well since they came to America.

* * * * *

When the women yelled, "Come and get it," everyone headed for the tables laden with food. After the blessing, the O'Shays filled their plates and headed for a table to eat. Blaise didn't recognize most of the dishes. He disliked mutton of any kind and politely refused when Rosaleen offered him a taste of the various meat dishes. The foods he did sample were delicious, though, especially the potato candy.

It was almost dusk by the time the meal ended. Everyone welcomed the cool, evening breeze after such a warm day.

The wagons heading west formed a circle. In the middle of the circle, large fires burned. Rosaleen and Blaise stayed close to Shawn and Janna, while the elder O'Shays and Shannon visited with friends for the last time.

Blaise enjoyed the dart-throwing contest, although he lost to Shawn. The young children had jumping contests and dog races. He refused to join the sack races but enjoyed watching Rosaleen and Janna participate. He laughed as they jumped their way across the field and over the finish line only to collapse in a fit of giggles.

The older men played horseshoes as they smoked their pipes and reminisced of days in the old country. The women gathered around the fires, rocking babies and small children to sleep as the bagpipes played in the distance.

For the first time in years, Blaise's thoughts were free of the war, and he felt elated. Rosaleen was amiable and appeared to enjoy his company. It would have been better if Paddy Fahy had stayed clear of them, but he seemed to haunt Rosaleen like a ghost. Blaise knew what it felt like to have a bruised ego, but he still didn't appreciate Paddy's persistence.

After the women tucked the children into their beds, the dancing began. The men made a dance floor out of planks, and the lively music started.

Everyone insisted that "the wedding dance" come first. Blaise wanted to dance with Rosaleen and was secretly thrilled that everyone expected him to do so. Grateful the wedding dance was a waltz and not an Irish reel, Blaise escorted Rosaleen onto the makeshift dance floor. As he held his wife close, the scent of honeysuckles filled his senses. Rosaleen was light on her feet, and she glided across the plank boards as though she were in a grand ballroom. The crowd grew quiet as the two newlywed couples swayed to the music.

Rosaleen yielded to Blaise's lead. Moonbeams danced across her face, and her eyes sparkled like precious jewels. Romance filled the air and Blaise remembered it had been a long time since he had been this close to a woman. And, in fact, he had never known a woman as enchanting as his bride.

All too soon, the waltz ended and the spell was broken. As the evening wore on, Blaise watched as the young men danced with his bride. Much to his vexation, Paddy made a point to cut in whenever he could. Why should Blaise care if she participated in every dance without him? Why should he care, indeed?

TWELVE



Blaise tried to ignore the glares from his aunt and uncle as they ate their breakfast in silence. For some reason, they opposed his decision to head west to find out what had happened to his parents. Amanda, on the other hand, remained supportive of her brother's plan, though she still disagreed with his decision to marry Rosaleen.

Blaise was about to get up from the table when Smitty entered the room and handed him a piece of paper. "I'm sorry for interrupting your meal, Mr. Cameron, but you have a visitor."

When Blaise read the note he smiled broadly, hardly believing his good fortune.

"It must be good news," Amanda said.

"Who would call this early in the morning?" May Cameron's voice was laced with annoyance. "Tell whomever it is to come back later."

Smitty glanced from Blaise to May. "Should I show him to the parlor, sir?"

"No, Smitty. Tell my friend I'll be out in a minute."

Blaise pushed himself away from the table, then rose to leave. "Please excuse me."

"Blaise, is anything wrong?" Amanda asked.

Blaise smiled. "It's just an old friend coming to say good-bye. I'll chat with him a few minutes and then send Smitty for you. I need to be at the train station early, so I won't be long."

Blaise grabbed his coat and hat before heading for the front door. When he opened it, there stood Ross Peterson. The two men shook hands and greeted each other like old friends.

"Boy, I thought I might have missed you," Ross said. "I was sure you'd be on your way to California by now."

"You're just the person I wanted to see. I need your help, Ross."

"Am I gonna like it?"

"No, but come with me anyway." Blaise laughed, starting down the stairs and heading for the stables. "You're gonna spy for me."

* * * * *

Shannon spent the night with a friend, leaving the tick mattress on the floor of the McNallys' wagon for Rosaleen. Her parents disapproved of Rosaleen spending her wedding night in the wagon with them instead of staying with her husband, but she convinced them it was best under the circumstances. Blaise had left the festival early to attend to his affairs.

Janna and Shawn retired to a tent they had borrowed. Rosaleen felt a twinge of jealousy at her brother's happiness.

At dawn, Rosaleen awoke to the sound of voices. Clearly, her family and others in the camp were excited about leaving for California. She wished she felt the same way, but the thought of her sham of a marriage to Blaise hung over her heart like a

dark cloud. It would be worth it to see her parents happy and safe—or at least Rosaleen hoped so.

Reluctantly, she rose and dressed. After smoothing the wrinkles from her shamrock-green skirt, she tucked in her waist shirt. It wasn't the best traveling suit, but it would have to do. She brushed her hair and tied it back with a red bandana. Then she repacked her bag, grabbed her shawl, and climbed out of the wagon.

"'Tis about time ye got up, lass," Maureen said. "Yer Da has already delivered our belongin's to the train depot. He should be here soon, so ye best come and eat before we leave."

"Nay, Mama, I cannot eat. Me stomach is too nervous this morn."

"Ye should try. 'Taint healthy to go without somethin' in yer stomach."

Rosaleen knew anything she ate wouldn't stay in her stomach long. "I'll eat on the train if I get hungry."

"Are ye ready to go then, lassie? We cannot be late for the train."

"I'm as ready as I'm ever goin' to be, Mama," Rosaleen said with a weak smile.

"Aye, good. Shannon is with friends in the next wagon. We're just waitin' for yer da and Shawn to return. Janna should be here soon. She went to help Kathleen."

"I should have gotten up earlier so I could have helped," Rosaleen said.

"Nay, lass. Ye did not sleep well. I heard ye rollin' around in the wagon all night."

Rosaleen and her mother cleaned the breakfast dishes and tidied the camp. Then, Rosaleen's father's booming voice penetrated the early-morning silence.

"Me darlin', are ye ready to leave? Everythin' 'tis loaded."

Soon, they were in the wagon and on their way. Most of the congregation had come to see them off, so there was much laughter and gaiety on the journey to the train station. But Rosaleen remained quiet, her stomach reeling with every bounce and bump of the wagon.

She knew she had no reason to be nervous. Blaise Cameron wouldn't do anything to harm her, especially with her family traveling with them. Yet she wondered about her innermost feelings toward Blaise. *I dislike him very much, so why am I so fascinated with him?* Finally, she decided it was because she had never met such a conceited, self-interested man! Whatever the cause of her feelings, she would need to make more of an effort to get along with him. Her parents weren't stupid. They'd catch on quickly if she didn't uphold her end of the bargain with Blaise.

If Patrick found out why Rosaleen had married Blaise, the agreement would be over. He was a proud man and would not accept Blaise's generosity, because he would see it as charity. Even worse would be the idea that his daughter had married a man for a piece of land. Rosaleen's stomach roiled with apprehension, and she prayed silently for guidance.

Finally, the O'Shay family arrived at the train depot and gathered with the rest of the congregation. Reverend Donovan stood in his wagon and looked down at the group. He said a prayer for the O'Shays' safety and good fortune in California. After the prayer, they said their good-byes, then made their way toward the train.

Suddenly, someone shouted. Rosaleen turned from the train platform and saw a well-dressed man making his way through the crowd of well-wishers.

"If you are Mr. Patrick O'Shay, please, I need to speak with you," he said breathlessly as he approached.

Patrick gave his wife a puzzled look. "Aye, I be Patrick O'Shay. What can I do for ye?"

The man took several deep breaths before proceeding.

"I was afraid I'd miss you, Mr. O'Shay." He extended his hand in greeting. "My name is Timothy Withers. I represent the owner of Penn State Mining Company."

Patrick scowled. "What do ye want with me? Isn't me injuries enough for the great lordship? What does he want with me now?"

Mr. Withers shook his head. "Sir, I'm here on behalf of the mine's owner, to compensate you and your son for the injuries you suffered in the accident." Then, glancing at the crowd, he added, "And anyone one else who was injured in the cave-in or lost a loved one to the terrible accident."

"Are ye daft, man? There's never been any compensation in the past."

"The owner, who lives in California, recently discovered that the man in charge of operations had not compensated the injured workers and their families. Please be assured that the matter is being investigated."

Patrick spoke up, "Then the owner needs to know there wouldn't have been an accident if the foreman would've listened to the miners about the faulty beams. Mark me words, more lives will be lost if someone doesn't inspect the mine for faulty and inadequate materials."

"Thank you, Mr. O'Shay. I'll be sure it's looked into. I give my word."

The train whistled and the conductor shouted, "All aboard!"

"Good day to ye then, Mr. Withers. Me clan is boardin' the train. I must go."

As the O'Shays turned to enter the train car, Mr. Withers took Patrick's arm. "Mr. O'Shay, don't you want your money, sir?"

Patrick frowned. "Money?"

"I said you and your son were to be compensated, remember?" After placing his hat on his head, Mr. Withers drew some papers from his briefcase and handed them to Patrick. "The owner gives his deepest sympathy to you and your family for what happened. We spoke with your doctor and he told us you might never work again. Please accept this money as a token of the owner's sincere apology. I know it can't heal you, but it may make life a little better for you and your family, wherever you've decide to live."

Clearly stunned, Patrick accepted the envelopes. He handed one to Shawn and placed the one with his name marked on it in his pocket. "Thank ye, Mr. Withers, and please thank the owner of the mine. I hope me comrades at the mine receive the same for their damages."

"They will indeed, Mr. O'Shay." Mr. Withers smiled as he shook Patrick's hand. "God speed to you and your family."

Rosaleen followed her family to the passenger car. They spied several vacant seats and settled down for the short trip to New York harbor. After the conductor checked their tickets, Patrick opened the envelope. The O'Shays fell silent as they waited to find out what Mr. Withers considered compensation. Even the clatter of the train and the buzz of fellow passengers melted into the background.

Tears swelled in Patrick's eyes as he stared at the money in his hand. "The Lord has blessed us, Maureen darlin'. I cannot believe me eyes."

"Don't keep us in suspense, Patrick. Count it!"

Rosaleen heard the excitement in her mother's voice and held her breath.

"I'm lookin' at two thousand dollars, me darlin'." Patrick handed the money to his wife.

Everyone leaned closer to get a glimpse.

"May the Saints preserve us. It is two thousand dollars!" Maureen choked back a sob as tears rushed down her cheeks. "I cannot believe it, love."

Shawn quickly tore open his envelope. His eyes grew large as saucers, and he quickly held the money out for Janna to see.

Janna gasped. "It is real, Shawn? Do we really have one thousand dollars?"

"Aye, me darlin', 'tis real." Shawn beamed at his wife. "'Tis our future in California."

"'Tis all of our futures." Maureen smiled, putting Patrick's money in the front of her dress for safekeeping. "We all need to give thanks for God's generous gift. I know it must have been He who softened the mine owner's heart."

"Aye, me darlin', I agree. Now our comrades who were also hurt can have a bit of peace as they journey west."

Everyone was making plans for the future—except Rosaleen. Why couldn't Mr. Withers have found her father *before* she married Blaise Cameron? Now they had the money to go to California without his help! While she recognized the great blessing the money would be for her family, Rosaleen wondered what the Lord had in mind for her.

Just then, Rosaleen realized Blaise wasn't on the train with them. Maybe he had changed his mind; that would be the best news of all.

"Da, have ye seen me husband?" she asked.

"I forgot to mention I received a message from Blaise this morn. With all the excitement, it slipped me mind. He left a note at the train station sayin' somethin' came up, so he'll meet us at the harbor."

Of all the nerve, Rosaleen thought angrily. *He could've taken the time to come tell me instead of leavin' a message*

through my father. He lectures me on keepin' up appearances, and he does a fool trick like this.

"Now, lassie, me thinks yer *caomhain* must have had a good reason to go on without ye," Patrick said in Blaise's defense.

Rosaleen remained silent, afraid she would say something she would regret. But she would let Blaise Cameron have it with both barrels when she saw him.

"Seein' as how we have the extra funds now, plus the money Shawn got for the furniture, we will not be havin' as hard a trip on the ship as we first thought. We have enough money for separate rooms now. Shawn, ye and yer new wife can have the cabin next to yer Mama and me. Shannon, ye'll be sleepin' with us." He looked at Rosaleen and smiled. "And ye, lassie, yer husband reserved a room for the two of ye."

Rosaleen's hand flew to her mouth. What was she to do? "But, Da, ye should save the money for when ye get to California. Ye'll need it then."

"Do not worry, me wee bairn. 'Tis costin' the same, really. I need to reserve two cabins anyway—one for the menfolk and one for the womenfolk.

"Blaise told me the clipper ship we'll be sailin' on is called the *Sea Nymph*. Just think, me clan, we'll be in California in three weeks. I cannot believe our good fortune." Patrick shook his head.

"But Mister . . . er, I mean, Blaise offered to pay for the fares."

"Ye should know yer da well enough to know I wouldn't take his money, not with a bit of me own in me pocket," Patrick scolded gently. "Ye can be proud, lassie, of yer man. I offered to pay for yer fare as well, but Blaise says he pays for his wife. 'Tis a proud man ye married, cailin."

“*Ochagon!*” Rosaleen said under her breath. She was doomed.

Rosaleen started to protest further but then clamped her mouth shut. It would seem odd if she did not want to share a private cabin with her new husband, especially since Shawn and Janna seemed thrilled with the prospects of a private cabin.

It was late afternoon when the train arrived in New York. Patrick oversaw the unloading of the O’Shays’ possessions into a wagon, and then they all left for the harbor.

As the port of New York loomed before them, Rosaleen recalled the day they landed in America. She never dreamed she would be sailing on a ship again so soon. Now, as they drew closer to the docks, she spotted the *Sea Nymph*—the most elegant vessel she had ever imagined. It was nothing like the bulky and awkward ship that had brought them to America. The *Sea Nymph* had a long, sleek hull with a concave bow, convex sides, a rounded stern, and tall masts with an enormous spread of canvas. Since the ship was smaller and lighter than the other ships, Rosaleen guessed it could sail at a much greater speed.

Shawn stopped the wagon and then jumped down and headed for a group of seamen. After conversing with the men, he returned to the wagon with a grin on his face. “Blaise is here and has already made arrangements for our cabins. We only have to unload our thin’s onto the ship.”

After they took their baggage onto the *Sea Nymph*, the O’Shays stood on deck and waited for Blaise. Finally, they saw him walking toward them.

Now things will really get interesting, Rosaleen mused. She took a deep breath and forced herself to smile. “Why, there’s me husband now. Did ye ever see such a handsome man in all yer born days?” Rosaleen sidled up to Blaise, saying in a low, husky

voice, "I missed ye last night, *gramachree*. I soon regretted ye left without me."

Why did the words flow so easily from her lips? Why did she enjoy speaking to Blaise this way? Why did her body so naturally respond to him?

Rosaleen stifled a giggle as Blaise's face turned a deep red, but it wasn't long before he overcame his obvious surprise and put his arm around her, squeezing her a bit too hard.

"I missed you too, darling. We'll make up for lost time tonight."

Rosaleen heard her father clear his throat, and she pinched Blaise's side, hoping no one could see.

"I'm sorry, Patrick, did you say something?" Blaise tried to remove Rosaleen's arm from his torso.

"Aye, lad, I just wanted to be tellin' ye that ye best be takin' good care of me daughter. If I be hearin' anythin' from Rosaleen I do not like, I'll be a takin' a *shilleah* to ye. Moreover, I be tellin' Rosaleen the same thin'. She can be a bit stubborn, but she can also be an *aingeal*. I told ye about her *nadur*, but I be thinkin' ye can tame her. I be hopin' ye have me an *ogha* soon. Seein' yer feelin's for each other, I'm sure ye will."

Blaise gave Patrick a puzzled look but then nodded as though he understood everything his father-in-law had said. "I'll do my best, sir."

Rosaleen nearly choked. What a stupid thing for Blaise to say to her father! A child was the last thing they needed, since their entire marriage was a fraud.

"Did ye hear that, lassie?" Patrick looked at Rosaleen. "Yer husband says ye'll be havin' me an *ogha* soon. Ye get to workin' on it, lassie. We'll see if it be ye or Shawn that makes me a *seanair* first."

Now it dawned on her. Blaise must be thinking of exercising

his husbandly rights after all. *That's what he thinks, but he'll soon find out differently.* Rosaleen threw Blaise an angry glare.

"Give us time, Da," Rosaleen replied. "I do not want ye gettin' yer hopes up so soon."

"Nonsense! Yer both healthy. 'Twill be soon, ye'll see." With a wide grin, Patrick rose to his feet. "Come and give yer da a hug, me darlin'. Then we all best be payin' for our fares and seein' to our cabins."

Rosaleen saw Blaise look from her to her father in bewilderment. If she weren't so angry with him, she'd have found his discomfort amusing.

After she and Blaise settled in their cabin, Rosaleen asked him in a low voice, "How dare ye be tellin' me da that we'll be havin' children soon! Not only have ye forgotten our agreement, but ye raised false hopes with yer blarney!"

"Just wait a blasted minute, Miss O'Shay. I didn't tell your father a cursed thing about having any kids. I'm the last person who wants a pack of Irish-tempered brats running around tying me to this marriage. I told you I couldn't understand those Irish words you and your family use. Your father said a lot to me I didn't understand. I only agreed with him."

"Well, ye best be more careful at what yer agreein' with. Yer pride could get us in trouble."

"My pride?"

"Aye, yer pride. If ye would have told me Da ye do not understand him, he would have explained."

"Stop talking in the Irish brogue. Your accent is so thick I cannot understand ye," he mocked.

"'Tis that so? Well, ye best get used to it."

"You won't be around that long."

"Thank the Saints for that." Then Rosaleen frowned. "By the way, why did ye have to get the cabin right next to me parents?"

'Tis goin' to be hard to keep up the pretense of bein' happily married."

"First of all, my darling wife," Blaise responded sarcastically, "I tried to acquire another cabin, but there weren't any. This is a small schooner with a limited amount of space. Besides, we have to get accustomed to this scheme if we want our plan to work. Remember, I don't like it any better than you, but let's at least try."

"I'll try, but no more shenanigans from ye."

"What about you? You're the one, who kissed me, remember?"

"'Twas only part of the act." Rosaleen tried to busy herself to avoid eye contact with Blaise. "I do not like it any better than ye. By the way, how did ye get to New York, since ye were not on the train with us?"

"Remember, ask no questions, Miss O'Shay."

With that, Blaise mumbled something about needing a drink and left Rosaleen in the cabin alone.

Soon, she left the cabin herself, but only to knock at the cabin next door. She helped her mother straighten the cabin and arrange the sleeping arrangements before it grew too dark. The day had gone more quickly than she'd imagined; if only the entire trip would pass as quickly. At least Blaise wouldn't be underfoot all the time. She wondered where he would keep himself but had agreed not to ask any questions. Frankly, she would rather not know everything he was up to.

* * * * *

Blaise did need a drink, but he also needed to get away from his beautiful but spirited wife. He enjoyed her kiss more than he wanted to admit, and he knew it would have been fun taming his Irish Rose under different circumstances.

Blaise headed down to find Jonas. He felt terrible that his friend had to sleep in the cargo hold, but he couldn't take the chance of anyone finding out they were acquainted.

"Lieutenant Cameron!" Jonas gasped when Blaise swung open the hatch to the hold. "I's sure hoping it was you dat's coming through de hatch. I's been hiding like you said, suh. Is everything all right? I mean with your new wife. I saw her coming on de ship. She's right purdy, Lieutenant. She sure gets lotta red hair, ain't she?"

"Yeah, and a temper to match, Jonas." Blaise smiled grimly. "How are you doing in here?"

"I's all right, Lieutenant Cameron. Kinda lonely, that's all. I's can take it."

"I'm sorry about this, Jonas. You deserve better than you're getting. I promise I'll make it up to you after I free my parents. It's just so important that no one links us together."

"I's know that, suh. I's been in worst places than this, so don't fret none."

"That was before the war, Jonas. Things will get better, you'll see. You're going to have to remember to call me Mr. Cameron, though. No one but my fellow war comrades and family know I was a lieutenant. Try to remember, all right?"

"Yessuh, Mista Cameron. I's will try."

"Are you getting hungry yet? I can bring you some food if you are."

"I's powerful hungry, Mista Cameron, and a mite cold, too."

"All right, I'll bring you some food and bedding. You could use a lantern, too. It's dark down here."

"Yessuh." Jonas flashed a big, toothy smile.

"I'll see you shortly then," Blaise replied. Before climbing the stairs to the deck, he added, "Thank you again, Jonas. You don't know what this means to me."

* * * * *

After dinner, everyone chatted in the dining room before retiring, since the cabins were too small to accommodate visitors. They spoke mostly of California and asked Blaise what the country was like. He quite enjoyed the conversation, but he tried to redirect any questions about his family. He would have to tell the O'Shays something before they arrived in California. Someone around Stockton would undoubtedly mention the situation with his parents. Even his parents' friends were sure to ask Blaise questions he couldn't answer. He needed to ponder as to what information he should divulge. Maybe he would even pray—something he hadn't done in a long time, at least not until the O'Shays came into his life.

They were a poor but proud family, something he'd never experienced. Proud yes, but never poor. His parents struggled through their poverty years before his birth. He wondered how things would've turned out if he had gone through some of the hardships with them. Maybe he'd appreciate life more.

However, the O'Shays had more than wealth. Obviously, they loved each other dearly. Blaise knew his parents loved him, but something was missing. How he envied Shawn and Patrick as they sat talking together, man to man. Watching them, Blaise realized how much he had missed by not having a close relationship with his own father. His father had always seemed too busy to spend time with Blaise, but now Blaise began to realize his own fault in the situation. After all, once he was grown, he hadn't really tried to spend time with his father. Blaise vowed that when he found his parents, his relationship with his father would change for the better.

While fighting in the war, Blaise had seen many things he wanted to forget. Perhaps he had gone through life with a chip

on his shoulder, because he was a Cameron—because his parents were wealthy and successful. Yes, things were going to change.

After everyone else went to bed, Blaise returned to the dining room to just sit and think. He also wanted to give Rosaleen a decent amount of time to prepare herself for bed before he barged in. As he sat alone in the dining room, he thought of her copper hair and her green eyes, and how her cheeks dimpled when she smiled. It seemed Rosaleen did not even realize what a beautiful woman she was, and how she lit up a room just by entering it. Her innocence made her even more appealing to him.

He caught himself thinking about Rosaleen and scowled. He refused to fall under her spell. In a couple of months, she'd be out of his life forever. That was what he wanted, wasn't it?

Rosaleen went to the cabin door and unlocked the latch. She didn't want to take any chances of Blaise entering unexpectedly while she undressed. She rechecked the buttons on the long, flannel nightgown to make sure they were secure. They may be married, but she would be modest at all costs.

Rosaleen removed the top quilt on the bed and pulled back the remaining quilts and sheet. She put the quilt and a pillow in the chair next to the bed, then moved the chair as far away from the bed as possible. Rubbing her hands together with satisfaction, she knelt beside the bed for prayer.

Blaise waited a few minutes outside the cabin, wondering if he should knock. He had never felt so nervous when it came to a woman. *Did the war ruin me?* he wondered. *How foolish I*

must look, lurking in the hall outside my cabin! He would look even more foolish if someone heard him knock on his own door. Bravely, he opened the door and marched in before he could talk himself out of it.

Clearly startled by his unannounced entrance, Rosaleen dropped to her haunches and then landed with a plunk on her backside. She gasped audibly and her hand went to her throat. Unruly hair framed her heart-shaped face, and her soft lips trembled. For the first time since Blaise had met Rosaleen, she appeared speechless. If he weren't concerned she might have hurt herself, he would have laughed.

"Ye scared me half to death!" Rosaleen scolded. "Ye just took ten years of me life, ye *mialach* mealltair!"

Blaise could hardly refrain from laughing. "If you're going to curse me, please use English so I know how offended I am to be."

"Ye be right. 'Tis not sweet nothin's I be tellin' ye, but I'm too much of a lady to curse, so do not push me."

"A lady? A tigress, a minx, a vixen, yes, but a lady?"

"Don't dishonor me name, Blaise Cameron. I have been known for punchin' a man before. Do ye want the same?"

When he saw Rosaleen make a fist with her dainty little hand, Blaise could contain himself no longer. He filled the room with loud, rolling laughter. "Do you know how silly you look, sitting on the floor in your nightgown, trying to defend your honor?"

With an anguished cry, Rosaleen tried to hide herself and then leaped into bed, pulling the covers up to her chin. "How dare ye be in me room when I'm nearly *nochdachd*—nearly naked!"

"Naked?" Blaise chuckled and shook his head incredulously. "I've seen less clothing on a nun! Besides your head, the only thing you've got showing is your hands and feet. It's not exactly what I expected to see my bride wearing on her wedding night."

"'Tis the closest thing to heaven yer ever goin' to see of me,

Blaise Cameron!" Rosaleen said through clenched teeth.

"'Heaven'?" Blaise clutched his side. "Please, I can't laugh anymore. Don't worry, Rosaleen dear, I shall not touch your wares. You'd have to grow up before I'd even consider it."

"Why, ye slaightear! Yer an *ainmhidh*!"

"That's good, dear," Blaise replied calmly. "Now, where do I sleep?"

"Where would ye think, ye *ababack mucan*!" Rosaleen pointed.

Blaise saw the quilt and pillow on the chair. "You mean I have to sleep in that contraption? It'll kill me!"

"Then I'll give ye a decent burial," Rosaleen said with a grin. "At sea."

"You're a cold woman, Rosaleen Katherine."

"Yer right, Mr. Cameron." Rosaleen faked a yawn and then rolled over and went to sleep.

THIRTEEN

Rosaleen awoke the following morning to incoherent murmurings. She rolled over and saw Blaise stumbling around the small cabin. He was indeed a sight in his long-handled underwear, and she couldn't help but laugh. "Have ye had a bad morn out and about, Mr. Cameron?"

Blaise jumped, clearly startled. "What in blazes are you talking about? I haven't left this cabin all night. But that's not a bad idea, Miss O'Shay."

"My, a wee peevish this bright and beautiful morn, aren't we?"

"Well, what do you expect after sleeping in a hard chair all night? Because of this wretched, rolling ship, I was pitched back and forth the entire night." Blaise placed his hand at the small of his back and tried to straighten up.

"Oh, did ye not sleep well, *machree*?" Rosaleen asked innocently. "I slept like a babe in this big feather bed."

"You don't have to rub it in, Miss O'Shay. I'll bet there'll be something in here tonight for me to sleep on. I refuse to use that

chair again!"

Rosaleen looked at Blaise's handsome face and giggled. "'Tis Miss O'Shay, eh? Have ye forgotten I'm Mrs. Cameron now?"

"How could I forget a fool thing like that? It's 'Miss O'Shay' when we're alone, whether you like it or not. Now, if you don't mind, I'm going to find a hot bath. Maybe I can soak out a few kinks." Blaise grabbed his clothes.

"I think I'll do the same," Rosaleen said sweetly. "Not to soak sore muscles, mind ye, but to wash the sleep from me eyes."

Blaise had just started out the door when Rosaleen called out to him, "Ah, Mr. Cameron, before ye leave ye best be puttin' somethin' on over yer, uh, drawers, in case ye meet someone along the way."

With a start, Blaise looked down at his underwear. Then he muttered under his breath, donned his robe, and left the cabin, slamming the door behind him.

Rosaleen smiled. "Why, he's as daffy as they come, poor man."

* * * * *

Rosaleen hummed an Irish tune as she took a seat next to Shannon for breakfast. After they exchanged greetings, Rosaleen poured herself a cup of steaming herbal tea. She sighed and began sipping the hot liquid.

"My, Rosaleen, yer in a happy state this morn," Shawn commented.

"Aye, that I am." Rosaleen took another sip of tea.

"I hate to take ye from yer dreamland, lassie, but where would yer caomhain be this morn?" her father asked.

"Why, right behind ye, Da."

Patrick turned in his chair. "So he is. Good morn, Blaise.

Come join us for breakfast.”

“Thank you, Patrick. I’m sorry if I kept everyone waiting. It took me longer than usual to prepare myself.” Blaise gave Rosaleen a quick glance.

“Do not worry, laddie. I just got here a few moments ago meself.”

Blaise took his place next to Rosaleen and accepted the cup she offered. He took a sip and frowned. He had assumed it was coffee in the cup, not tea, but now he had no choice but to swallow the horrid liquid. With an indignant scowl, he looked at Rosaleen. “Peppermint tea?”

“Aye. What were ye expectin’, me darlin’ husband?”

“Coffee, sweetheart. Strong coffee.” Blaise forced a smile.

“Oh, we don’t drink coffee,” Rosaleen replied matter-of-factly. “Did I not tell ye that?”

Blaise raised his brows. “No, dear, you left that part out. What do you suggest I drink? Don’t say tea. I hate tea.”

“Here, laddie, try this,” Patrick offered, pouring some dark liquid into a mug.

Blaise raised the steaming mug to his nose and took a whiff. It smelled like coffee, so he tasted it. “Not bad. What is it?”

“’Tis a blend of barley, chicory, and rye,” Patrick explained. “I cannot drink herbal tea all the time, so Maureen came up with this blend. I admit I like it even better than the coffee ye Yanks drink.”

Blaise nodded and took another sip of the hot drink. Then he quietly ate his breakfast, hoping to avoid a round of friendly chatter. He thought of Jonas and wondered how he was faring. He needed to take his friend some breakfast.

Next, Blaise reflected on the previous evening. After Rosaleen had fallen asleep, he had cautiously knelt down on the floor. He needed guidance and wisdom, and though he’d never been a

praying man, he didn't know who else to ask but God. Not only did he have to explain to the O'Shays about his family, but his neighbors and friends would be curious about the whereabouts of his parents. He would also have to justify the presence of Lance Kincaid on their ranch.

Blaise's troubles had come back to haunt him this morning as he'd soaked his sore muscles in a bath. Finally, it dawned on him. He would spread the story that his parents had written to him explaining that they'd hired a foreman to care for the ranch. There would be no one to dispute Blaise's word. He could tell Kincaid he didn't want to return to the ranch since he was now married. He would say he wanted a ranch of his own. Besides, nothing awaited him at home since his family was away. It could work! Eager to cover his tracks, Blaise felt almost human when he entered the dining room.

Now, an hour later, the muscles in his neck and back were tightening up again from sitting in another hard chair. Rubbing his neck, Blaise grumbled absently, "Oh, what a night I had."

Sudden silence brought him out of his private reverie. He looked around the table in confusion and found everyone staring at him. Rosaleen's eyes were huge, and a red stain appeared on her cheeks. Blaise glanced at the others and then back at Rosaleen. In a whisper, he asked her, "What's the matter with you? Are you near apoplexy? Did I miss something?"

Much to Blaise's surprise, Rosaleen said nothing. But Patrick's green eyes twinkled and a mischievous grin spread across his face. Blaise felt his stomach lurch, realizing that he had said something terribly wrong.

Patrick cleared his throat. "I hope tonight 'tis better than last night, laddie. I was a wee bit worried about ye and Rosaleen Katherine gettin' along, but now I see I have nothin' to fret about. Ye'll be havin' a wee bairn soon, I be thinkin'."

What in the world made Patrick think of children again? Blaise wondered. Well, he wasn't about to agree to something else he didn't understand.

"As we mentioned before, Patrick, Rosaleen and I are going to wait before we start a family." Blaise looked at Rosaleen for support.

Patrick ignored him. "After what ye said about last night, I be thinkin, ye won't have any say in the matter. Nature doesn't ask for permission, laddie. Did not yer da tell ye nothin'?"

Blaise ran his hand through his hair. "Listen, Patrick—" he started to explain, but Rosaleen interrupted by excusing them from the table. *What a relief!*

She led him to a secluded area of the deck and looked up at him with fire in her eyes. "What got into ye this morn? That was a fine statement to make in front of me clan! Now ye've really fixed thin's."

"I didn't realize I had spoken out loud. I tried to explain, but you stopped me." Blaise gritted his teeth and tried to stay calm. "So you have yourself to blame if they still think what they do."

Rosaleen's hands went to her hips. "'Tis me fault now? Yer the *amadan!* It would've seemed strange to me parents findin' out ye slept in a chair. Perhaps 'tis better for them to be thinkin' we had a fine night together." She softened a little. "Maybe this is a blessin' in disguise. Me parents won't be watchin' us so close if they think we're a real married couple. When we get to California, they won't be suspicious, and ye can do whatever ye want. I won't be a bother to ye anymore."

"I've had more trouble with you than I did with the Rebs in the war." Blaise glanced away from Rosaleen and tried to focus on the vast ocean.

"Ye cannot go blamin' this on me. 'Twas yer doin', Blaise

Cameron.”

“I’m not going to stand here arguing with you, Miss O’Shay. I’ve got better things to do.”

As he looked out at the rolling waves, Blaise felt the deck sway beneath his feet. The more he looked across the white-foamed horizon, the worse his stomach felt. Perhaps he shouldn’t have eaten such a hearty breakfast.

“What can ye have to do on a ship?” Rosaleen was clearly vexed.

“No questions, remember?” With that, Blaise turned on his heel and left, not wanting to lose his breakfast in front of her.

Shortly thereafter, Blaise composed himself and cautiously entered the galley, hoping none of the O’Shays would see him. He packed some food and water in a sea bag and delivered it to Jonas in the hold. Blaise’s stomach was still queasy, so he decided to lie down. As he walked toward the cabin, he recalled what Rosaleen had said. For once, she made sense. It would be better if her family thought they were normal newlyweds.

But why should it bother him what the O’Shays thought? After all, he had legally married Rosaleen. When he pondered over it a little while longer, Blaise concluded that even though he clashed wills with Rosaleen, he still respected her and her family. They were good people. He didn’t want Rosaleen’s parents to find out what a cad he really was. Maybe it was a guilty conscience that bothered him.

That’s all he needed on top of all his other worries. Thank goodness he’d be home soon. Dealing with Lance Kincaid and his bunch had to be easier than dealing with Rosaleen Katherine O’Shay.

The late afternoon sunlight streamed through the porthole,

coaxing Blaise from his nap. He glanced up and saw Rosaleen curled snuggly in the chair, reading a book. She didn't notice he had awakened, so he lay still and watched her.

Why did she haunt him so? In the past, women had found him attractive, and he'd had no problem showing his affection to them. Perhaps the novelty with Rosaleen was that she despised him. What else could it be?

"I see yer finally awake."

Surprised by the softness of Rosaleen's voice, Blaise rolled on his side and rested his head on his bent arm. "How long did I sleep?"

"About two hours. Ye must have been tired."

"After last night's fiasco, I could've slept on a bed of nails."

"Did ye find anythin' to sleep on tonight?" Rosaleen asked as she closed her book.

"There is nothing available. My friend, Captain Stewart, offered me more quilts. I couldn't seem too anxious for separate sleeping arrangements without John becoming suspicious. I guess I'll try the floor tonight. Anything is better than that chair."

"Yer going to have to think of somethin' better than that when we arrive at the ranch." Rosaleen chuckled and shook her head.

"I'm sure happy to see you find my predicament so amusing, Miss O'Shay, but you may be laughing from the other side of your mouth soon. This isn't over yet."

"I can take whatever ye throw at me, Mr. Cameron. I'm not the weak-kneed ninny ye may think I am."

"Is that so?" Blaise grinned. "We'll wait and see how you handle things in California. For now, I'm starving. When is dinner?" He hoped he might keep a little soup down.

"Well, it's like this," Rosaleen replied as she clenched her hands in her lap. "Janna and Shawn decided to have an intimate dinner alone in their cabin. With us also bein' newlyweds, I

thought it would be all right if we dined alone too.”

“You decided that all by yourself, did you?”

“What was I suppose to do?” Rosaleen said hotly. “Me parents would have thought somethin’ amiss if we did otherwise. Newlyweds are usually known to be wantin’ privacy, ye know.”

That made sense, Blaise decided. Besides, if he stayed in their cabin the rest of the evening, he wouldn’t have to worry about pleasing the O’Shays. A nice, quiet evening alone was just what he needed.

“I’ll agree this time, but from now on, I want to be consulted. I’ll not have my wife running my life.”

“Do not worry about that. I won’t be around long enough, Mr. Cameron. If ye do not mind, I’ll go wash before dinner. That is, if ye can order it.” With that, Rosaleen exited the cabin and closed the door behind her.

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How dare he! Blaise treated her as though she had no feelings and not a lick of sense. He was proud and bullheaded, and Rosaleen could scarcely tolerate his arrogance and condescension. She acknowledged she didn’t know much about America yet, and she needed to work on her English, but Blaise didn’t have to belittle her constantly.

How will I survive this cursed voyage? she thought as she stood at the ship’s rail looking out at the dark sea. Once they reached the ranch, things would certainly be better. At least they wouldn’t have to be under each other’s feet all the time. Ever since they’d boarded the ship, she’d felt like she and Blaise were joined at the hip, as if one couldn’t do anything without the other. “That will soon change,” she muttered under her breath.

Rosaleen needed someone to share her problems with,

but she had promised Blaise she wouldn't confide in anyone regarding issues that involved him. She especially missed talking with Janna. Of course, she understood her friend's priorities as a newly married woman, and if she were in love with Blaise, she'd be acting the same way.

In love with Blaise. What an absurd notion! She didn't even like him . . . or did she? She had to admit she was strangely attracted to him. His hair was a beautiful mixture of brown and gold. And his eyes. *Oh, his eyes!* Rosaleen thought wistfully. They were as blue as the sky in summertime. Suddenly, she caught herself. "Yer goin' daffy, Rosaleen Katherine, to be thinkin' this way," she said aloud. "Remember 'tis not yer sweet disposition he married ye for."

Looking around, Rosaleen realized she had attracted the attention of several seamen. She raised her chin in defiance and left for her cabin.

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When Rosaleen entered the small cabin, Blaise lay on the bed with one hand on his forehead and the other on his stomach. He noticed that her eyes went immediately to the beautifully set table for two, complete with candles and wine.

"Why, may I ask, are you frowning? Don't tell me you disapprove of dinner," he said sarcastically, rising to a more gentlemanly position.

"'Tis not the dinner I object to." Rosaleen stared at him defiantly. "The last man who bought me a dinner such as this had more than conversation on his mind."

"Well, believe me, I have neither on my mind. I merely asked to have dinner in our room. The cook, or whoever it was, took it upon himself to add the romantic touches you see."

“I should have known ye wouldn’t go to so much trouble.”

Blaise could have sworn he saw disappointment on Rosaleen’s face, but surely he was mistaken.

They each took a seat at the table. Blaise raised the domed lid on his plate, took one look at the food, and felt his stomach rebel. Under normal circumstances, he could have quickly devoured the deliciously prepared meal, but with his stomach still in his throat, he decided on the broth.

When he glanced up, Blaise saw Rosaleen sitting patiently with her hands clasped in her lap.

“Now what’s the matter? Am I to test your food for poison or something? Believe me, I wouldn’t try to kill you.” He grinned wickedly. “At least, not until I’m through with you.”

Rosaleen was clearly unamused.

“Say something, will you?” Blaise frowned. “Don’t just sit there staring at me.”

“Do ye not think we best be givin’ thanks for this meal?”

With an exasperated sigh, Blaise lowered his head. Rosaleen would domesticate him whether he wanted her to or not. Well, he’d go along with blessing the dinner, but he drew the line at any further religious ceremonies. What he had to say to God would come when he was ready.

After Rosaleen blessed the food, they started their meal in silence. Blaise glanced up periodically and caught her gaze.

“How long have ye lived in California, Mr. Cameron?”

“No questions, remember?”

“I did not think ye meant I couldn’t ask ye anythin’ about yerself. I just thought a wife should know somethin’ about her husband.”

Blaise pushed away his soup bowl and poured a cup of the chicory blend he’d had for breakfast. He didn’t want a repeat of the seasickness.

"I suppose you're right, Miss O'Shay. I was born and raised on my parents ranch outside Stockton, California."

"Is that where ye'll be takin' us?"

"In a way. The homestead we're going to is adjacent to my parents' ranch."

"I see. Is yer parents' ranch as big as the homestead?"

"Actually, it's much larger. The Buckshot Ranch is over fifteen hundred acres."

Rosaleen's mouth flew open. "My goodness, 'tis very large indeed. Why in the world would anyone need that much land? The hundred-acre homestead is quite large to farm by itself."

Blaise leaned back in his chair. "We don't farm the land. My father wouldn't be a farmer for anything. We raise cattle—prime Black Angus. It takes a lot of land to do that."

"What's wrong with bein' a farmer, Mr. Cameron?" Rosaleen snapped. "Me own da was a farmer in Ireland. In fact, they were the happiest times of our lives."

"I'm not saying there's anything wrong with being a farmer, Rosaleen." Blaise waited for a reprimand for using her Christian name, but none came. "Any honest toil a person decides to do in their life is up to them. As long as they're happy with what they do, that should be enough. But farmers aren't very popular with the big ranchers in our area. The ranchers need the open ranges for their cattle. They don't like squatters coming in and fencing off their grazing land."

"I cannot believe the ranchers would be that selfish," Rosaleen said. "Why, America is so big! There should be enough land for everyone to have a wee bit of his or her own. More's the pity. If ye Americans only knew what it was like in Ireland, ye would be thankful with a wee bit of land instead of tryin' to be greedy and takin' all of it for yerselves."

Blaise took a sip of the hot drink. "Well, how about telling

me about Ireland, Rosaleen? I would be interested in hearing about your culture. I knew a few Irishmen during the war, but everyone treated them badly. In fact, I should warn you that you and your family may not be welcomed into the community with open arms. The people around Stockton will most likely punish you for the gossip they've heard."

"If they do, we will not leave. Me parents have been dreamin' of California for too long." Rosaleen shrugged her shoulders and absently shoved the food around on her plate. "Besides, we've been on the opposin' side most of our lives. 'Tis the same all over the world, I be thinkin'."

"Tell me about your life in Ireland," Blaise asked. "I really would like to hear about it."

He watched as a dreamy, faraway look came across Rosaleen's face, her eyes sparkling with fondness at the mention of her beloved homeland.

"There were hardships in Eire, but happiness, too. Me da's family worked on the same farm for over a hundred years. Oh, the good times we had there! I'll never forget them. The sheep and livestock, along with a wee garden, kept us busy. Me da was happy. It was his life."

"What happened?"

Rosaleen pushed her plate away, her expression suddenly melancholy. "Eire is different in many ways from America. The English rule Ireland, not the Irish. The queen raised the taxes so high, it was impossible to pay them. When we refused to move from the land, the soldiers came, burned the cottage down, and took our animals. The soldiers' horses trampled all of the crops. We saved only a few possessions before they destroyed the cottage.

"We tried to get by the best way we could. Me grandparents lived with us then, and they needed a safe, warm place to live. Da

finally found a job as a caretaker for a wealthy squire. The squire gave us a wee cottage to live in, but it wasn't the same. The land and the crops belonged to the squire.

"After me grandparents died, with Eire in such a bad way, Da decided we should come to America. The small congregation we attended church with banded together and came across the ocean to America."

Blaise gently eased his body against the back of the chair. "It must have been difficult leaving your country and your way of life to come to a strange land filled with strange people."

"Aye, 'twas difficult indeed. We did not expect a war to be ragin' in America. Nor did we expect the dislike—nay, hatred—from the Americans. We only wanted our freedom and a chance for happiness. I did not think we would ever make it to California. But I would have done almost anythin' to see me parents happy.

"What about yer parents, Mr. Cameron? What will they say when they find out yer bringin' home an Irish girl?"

"I'm afraid I won't find that out for a few months. They're abroad at the moment."

"You mean they do not know about me and my clan yet?"

"Don't act so shocked, Miss O'Shay. Our wedding wasn't exactly something I'd write home to Mother about."

"Ye could have told me that," Rosaleen exclaimed. "If yer parents aren't here, then who's been carin' for yer ranch while ye were away at war?"

Blaise cleared his throat, then tried in vain to make eye contact with her. "They hired a foreman before they left."

"How about brothers or sisters? Are ye alone, then?"

"I have a sister named Amanda. She's staying in Pittsburgh with an aunt and uncle."

Rosaleen appeared aghast. "Ye mean yer parents took off to parts unknown while ye were away at war? What if ye needed

them? What if ye were hurt? And yer sister did not come home with ye after ye were gone four long years? Ye poor man! No wonder yer so bitter. Yer clan is very uncarin'."

"Do not speak against my family, Rosaleen Katherine! You don't know the entire story." Blaise threw his napkin on the table and rose to his feet. "I'll stay out of your family affairs, and you stay out of mine."

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Rosaleen glared at Blaise as he stomped to the cabin door. Her first impulse was to rage back at him, and then she recalled what he'd said about his family. Blaise was a lonely man. She could see the hurt hidden beneath his masculine pride. This time she'd hold her tongue. But when she met his parents and sister, she'd show *them* her Irish temper.

In the mean time, she'd try harder to understand Blaise. Since he didn't want her pity, she had to give him some credit. But he didn't want her love, either. For some reason, that knowledge left her disappointed.

FOURTEEN

As they sailed around Cape Horn—the roughest stretch of the voyage—Blaise felt as if he couldn't take another moment of the rolling and swaying of the ship. The cabin floor had proven a tolerable bed for the past week, but last night's storm had nearly done him in. He had lived through the gusty winds for the last few days, but this was too much.

Every time the small vessel pitched and wheeled, so did he, and it wasn't pleasant. More than once, his head hit the wall or the leg of the bed. The constant pitching finally won out just before dawn. Blaise went to the open deck and looked out across the swelling waves that seemed to close in on him. He would never again travel by sea—this unpredictable, vast, and lonely wasteland where he had no control over his circumstances. On the range, driving a herd of cattle, he could at least partly control the outcome of any given situation. The sea was confining, but Blaise felt at ease on the range. He yearned for the open prairie.

When he had left the cabin, Rosaleen had been fast asleep, quite oblivious to his discomfort. What he would give to get

a decent night's sleep! That unfeeling Irish minx could have a little mercy on him and at least let him sleep in the bed for one night. Getting amorous was the last thing on his mind. Sweet, uninterrupted sleep is what he wanted, and he was determined to get it. He stormed back to the cabin and threw open the door. To his surprise, Rosaleen was already up and gone. He must have stood out on the deck longer than he realized. Grumbling under his breath, Blaise removed his pants and shoes and climbed into the bed. Within minutes, he was fast asleep.

* * * * *

Rosaleen put off breakfast with her family for almost an hour, waiting for Blaise to appear, before finally giving up.

When she had awakened that morning, Blaise had been gone, so she'd left her room to find her parents. She was relieved to escape another potential confrontation.

Once everyone had finished breakfast, Rosaleen had left to search for Blaise but couldn't find him anywhere. It was a small vessel, so she wondered how he could have disappeared.

Again, she searched the dining room, hoping he had decided to have breakfast after all, but she found only her family still conversing over tea. After making excuses to her parents, Rosaleen decided to check the cabin before reporting Blaise's absence to the ship's captain. When she entered the small room, she was relieved to see Blaise fast asleep in the bed. How inconsiderate of him to have not at least informed her where he was!

"Mr. Cameron." Rosaleen gave Blaise a nudge on the shoulder. "Wake up, ye cur."

Rosaleen waited a moment, expecting Blaise to complain loudly, but he didn't even wake up. She tried again to rouse him,

but with no luck. Finally, she shrugged and gave up. He must have been more tired than she had realized.

Rosaleen had found it quite amusing to watch him suffer with his sleeping arrangements, but looking at his peaceful face in slumber, she felt ashamed of herself. She should never have allowed her anger and pride to go so far. After all, Blaise wasn't as bad as she'd thought at first. In fact, he could be quite pleasant when he wanted to be. He had proven to be witty, intelligent, and charming. Things might've been much different if they'd had a normal courtship. Maybe, Rosaleen thought, if she tried harder she could make their brief marriage tolerable. Rosaleen admitted she had a dreadful temper, and she knew she brought many hardships on herself.

She closed the door behind her and moved to the bed, still studying Blaise's sleeping form. She gently touched his flaxen hair, then ran her fingers through the silky smoothness. His eyes fluttered and a low moan escaped his lips. Rosaleen drew her hand back, feeling her heart pound in her chest.

Then, gathering her courage, she reached out and gently traced her fingertips down his jawline, surprised at the smoothness of his skin. When she reached his chin, she slid her fingertip into the deep cleft.

Rosaleen wet her lips with her tongue, then drew her hand to her mouth. The more she stared at Blaise's firm lips, the greater became her urge to gently press her mouth to his. The thought shocked her, but still she could not resist. She bent over Blaise and kissed him.

She felt his mouth respond automatically to her innocent caress. Blushing, Rosaleen drew back and placed the palms of her hands on her flushed cheeks. What had she done? Blaise mustn't wake and find her swooning all over him like a lovesick schoolgirl. Before he could awaken, Rosaleen fled the cabin.

Ye are a fool, Rosaleen Katherine O'Shay, she thought as she hurried down the narrow corridor. Finally, she reached the stairs and ran up to the deck. Still catching her breath as she leaned against the side of the ship, she looked across the rushing waves of the endless blue ocean. A faint breeze fluttered across her heated cheeks, cooling her brow but not the fire that raged within her. The tranquil serenity of the open sea did little to settle the tension that seemed to throb with every breath she took.

As Rosaleen stood on deck, she overheard Captain Stewart tell her parents the clipper was making good time, thanks to the constant breezes along the way. They would arrive in San Francisco in a week or so.

Rosaleen smoothed her hair and drew her shawl closer around her shoulders. The cool breeze nipped at her nose and chilled her limbs. She took a deep breath and went to find her family.

Since the cabins were so small, everyone congregated in the dining room until late in the evening. The dining room was also a good place to keep abreast of the happenings of the ship and crew. There were a few passengers besides her family, but Rosaleen hadn't taken the time to be acquainted.

When she entered the room, Rosaleen found everyone deep in conversation. She glanced around for Shawn and Janna and saw them sitting across from Shannon.

"There ye are, Rosaleen. I looked all over for ye," Shannon said as Rosaleen sat next to her.

"Did ye need me for somethin'?"

"Nothin' important. I was just bored, that's all," Shannon replied with a pout. "This voyage isn't as fun as the one we took from Ireland. There aren't any other kids to play with this time. Ye and Shawn are always busy anymore. What do ye all find to do in yer wee cabins all day?"

Almost choking on his tea, Shawn glanced at Janna's red face as she stared down at the table. Rosaleen tried to keep a straight face at her brother's abashment, but amusement crept into her voice. "I know what keeps Blaise and me busy," she volunteered. "Ye'll have to ask Shawn what he does, dear sister."

Shannon looked innocently from Shawn to Janna, waiting for a reply.

Ignoring the probing stares from Shannon, Shawn inquired about Blaise's whereabouts.

Without thinking, Rosaleen said, "He hasn't been sleepin' well since we sailed, so he's restin'."

She saw the satisfied expression on Shawn's countenance and realized her mistake. But she couldn't retract her statement without looking like a complete fool, so she added defiantly, "He's not used to the rockin' and rollin' of the ship."

Behind her, Rosaleen heard a couple of seamen snicker. Curse this ploy! If she hadn't promised Blaise her secrecy, she'd put those brash men on their ears. Instead, she smiled sweetly at Shawn and whispered, "What's yer excuse, dear brother, for bein' such a recluse?"

Her brother cleared his throat and promptly excused himself. Shannon lost interest in the conversation and left.

Rosaleen waited until Shawn was out of hearing distance before apologizing to Janna. "I'm sorry, aroon *puithar*. I do not mean to embarrass ye. As for Shawn . . ." her voice trailed off.

"Don't worry about it." Janna giggled and then whispered, "It does Shawn good to express his feelings more openly, and me too, I guess. We're so much alike. Maybe that's what drew us together. We're both shy, but Shawn is too serious. He needs to be more carefree. You and Blaise seem to be getting along better, but I'm not convinced yet. Something isn't quite right."

Rosaleen fidgeted under Janna's scrutiny. Finally, she asked in a high-pitched voice that seemed false even to her, "Whatever do ye mean, Janna?"

"I can't quite put my finger on it."

"Bah, everythin's fine." Rosaleen waved her hand dismissively. "Yer just so happy and blindly in love with Shawn, ye expect the same for Blaise and me. Your and Shawn's love was united with friendship. Love will come later for us, too."

Rosaleen couldn't believe the sincerity in her voice. Was it wishful thinking, or was she becoming an expert at dishonesty?

"It's more than that, Rosaleen. I don't think you or Blaise even know your true feelings toward each other. I'm sure you both would be surprised if you'd only confide in each other."

"Humph! What a mystic ye are, Janna."

With a shrug, Janna smiled and left to find her husband.

Alone, Rosaleen sat and thought about Blaise Cameron.

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When Blaise entered the dining area, Rosaleen greeted him with a smile. He returned the greeting and took a seat across from her, wondering what on earth had so unexpectedly altered her disposition. Perhaps she was a better actress than he gave her credit for.

Candles cast a rosy glow in the darkened room as Blaise listened to the O'Shays' conversation with nearby passengers at the table. Through the flickering dimness, Rosaleen's emerald eyes seemed to sparkle. The light caught her brilliant curls, and the flames seemed to dance around her head like a halo. Her laughter filled the air like soft music.

Blaise suddenly felt intoxicated with his wife, and he drank in her beauty when she demurely looked his way. What was

this madness he felt? Had Shannon's fairies or leprechauns cast a spell on him?

Then, as suddenly as the magical moment had come, it was gone. Blaise felt cheated somehow, but upon further reflection, he decided it was for the best. No telling what he would say—or do—to Rosaleen in such a state of mind.

Blaise sought out the voice that broke the spell. He glanced around the long table and saw Patrick looking at him questioningly.

"I'm sorry, sir. I didn't catch what you said."

"Aye, laddie, that I know. Ye were hypnotized by me daughter's beauty. I could see it in yer eyes."

Blaise nodded and looked across the table at Rosaleen, who sat in deep conversation with Janna.

"I asked if ye be knowin' anythin' about farmin', laddie."

Blaise reluctantly directed his attention to his father-in-law. "I don't know a lot about farming, Patrick, but I know quite a bit about cattle. I grew up on one of the largest cattle ranches in California. I must admit there are a few things I'd like to change in the way my father operates his ranch."

"What would that be? This ranchin' 'tis quite foreign to me and me son here."

"Well, to start with, I'd grow my own winter feed. My parents' ranch is quite large, and the losses can be astronomical. The prominent ranchers in California rely on the open ranges to feed their cattle all year round. They take them up to the high country in the early spring and bring them back down in the fall. We have no winter sheds to protect the cattle from the bitter winter weather, so we end up losing cattle by letting them roam the open prairies and fend for themselves. Our ranch borders the Sierra Nevada Mountains, so we get some cold weather. The pastures can't produce enough fodder to

sustain the herds through the winter months.”

“I do not understand why yer father wouldn’t make provisions, if all yer sayin’ is true,” Shawn said.

“He doesn’t believe the cattle saved would be worth it, Shawn. I’ve tried to tell him he wouldn’t have to produce cattle in such volume if he could keep more of them alive through the winter. I also think it would be better to keep the best stock for breeding and build the herds for market.”

Blaise shook his head and sighed. “None of the ranchers will even discuss it with me. They’ve done it their way so many years, they’re afraid to gamble with modern ideas. But the range wars are coming. The big, rich ranchers are forcing small farmers off their land because they don’t want the rangeland fenced off and divided into small farms. I’m not so power hungry and greedy that I’d stop homesteaders from settling. There’s plenty to go around if everyone will cooperate.”

“Won’t yer da listen to ye, lad?”

Blaise leaned back in his chair. “No, Patrick. He got where he is by following his own instincts, and, besides, I’m still a child as far as he’s concerned. I don’t know if he’ll ever listen to me.”

Patrick sat quietly for a moment. “Ye were responsible enough to fight for this country. Ye should be old enough to be knowin’ yer own mind.”

“Not everyone feels the same as you do.” Blaise chuckled. “That’s why it’s important to me to make the homestead profitable. I want to show my father and the other ranchers that my idea will work. The cattle will be healthier if we feed them well through the winter. When spring comes, the cattle will fetch a much better price because they won’t be so thin and sick.

“Maybe the smaller farmers and ranchers would have a better chance at keeping their property from the larger ranchers if they didn’t need the grazing land in such abundance. I’m hoping I

can prove my point by the time my parents return from Europe. I know if my father succeeds, a lot of his friends will follow.”

“Yer plans sound practical to me. How about ye, Shawn?”

“It makes good sense to me, Da. We raised oats and wheat, among other thin’s, in Ireland. We can do the same here.”

“We’ll help yer dream come true, Blaise,” Patrick said. “We be wantin’ a future in America also. Yer way seems the smartest to go about it. After all, laddie, ye have already made our dream come true. It’s the least we can do for ye.”

Blaise looked down at his plate and then glanced at Rosaleen.

He felt like a fraud. The things he’d said were true, but he felt guilty leading the O’Shays along. If only it could work out somehow. He’d be proud to associate with the O’Shay family, but he had made a deal with Rosaleen, and his parents’ safety had priority over his own life and happiness.

Too emotional to speak, Blaise nodded. Patrick offered him friendship and took his ideas seriously. With their goodness and pride, it would be easy to love the O’Shay family—all of them.

Rosaleen softly sang an Irish melody as she walked along the deck, soaking in the full moon, the cool breeze, and the gentle lapping of the waves against the clipper. She couldn’t bear to be cooped up alone in the small cabin, especially on such a beautiful, romantic evening.

When she noticed Blaise’s unusual mood at dinner, Rosaleen had wondered if he’d felt her kiss him while he slept. Could he see into the depths of her being and feel her growing attraction to him? He had regularly glanced at her during the meal, giving her smiles that were, well, almost sweet. *Maybe he is fallin’ in love*

with me! she thought. *Could I love him back?* The idea filled her body and soul with a longing she had never before experienced. Was this love?

Rosaleen sighed. The whole idea was ludicrous. Even if she could fall in love with Blaise, it wouldn't matter. This marriage was a mockery and would not last long; that much he had made plain. Rosaleen knew that he had his reasons for the marriage, and that he would have to settle those matters before he could concentrate on a permanent marriage. Even then, it wouldn't be to an Irish immigrant. There had to be someone more suitable, someone with the same social background.

Rosaleen felt tears on her cheeks and reached up to wipe them away. She was indeed starting to care for Blaise, but she knew it would only bring her heartache to wish for more than what he offered her now. She must accept that there would never be a future for them together.

With a defeated sigh, Rosaleen headed back down to her quarters. She entered the dark cabin and lit the lamp, noting the unoccupied bed. She had thought—and almost hoped—Blaise might have decided to sleep there again.

"What should I do now?" Rosaleen said to herself. It was too early to retire, so she decided to prepare for bed and read her Bible until she grew sleepy.

When Blaise entered the cabin, Rosaleen still sat in bed reading. "I didn't mean to disturb you, Miss O'Shay."

Rosaleen tried to cover herself more properly. "'Tis no bother, Mr. Cameron. 'Tis yer room also, remember."

"Well, I won't be long. I just came to tell you I won't be spending the night in the cabin."

"Oh, all right," Rosaleen said quietly.

"Well, I'll see you tomorrow, Miss O'Shay." As Blaise started to leave, he turned to look at her again. "Sweet dreams,

Rosaleen Katherine.”

The soft tone of his voice sent a thrill through Rosaleen’s entire being. She wanted to ask him to stay, but she didn’t dare. Even though they didn’t get along very well, Rosaleen had grown accustomed to having him around, and she was already starting to dread the day when their marriage would be over. Then she would never see him again.

Once Blaise was gone, Rosaleen set aside her Bible, blew out the lamp, and closed her eyes. How she missed arguing with Blaise! He paid her more attention then. He still left the cabin regularly, never hinting at where he went, but when he did speak to Rosaleen, he was quite civil. He was probably just trying to keep the peace, biding his time until they arrived in California. Then he would accomplish his task—whatever that was—and divorce her.

FIFTEEN



For the remainder of the voyage, Blaise was more reserved than ever, making the trip a lonely one for Rosaleen. He continued the charade of wedded bliss in the company of others, but Rosaleen missed spending time alone with him in their cabin. She wanted to question him, yet it seemed they were never alone together.

Rosaleen had no idea where Blaise spent the last several nights on the ship. Every morning, he simply appeared at the cabin door to escort her to breakfast. At the beginning of the journey, Rosaleen would have been delighted with rarely seeing him, but now she detested it.

With no one to confide in, and with Blaise gone most of the time, Rosaleen thought about her dilemma almost constantly. She vowed to find out what was bothering Blaise—and what his secret plan was—even if she had to use drastic measures.

On the day the ship would arrive in San Francisco, Rosaleen paced the floor in her cabin. She hoped Blaise would come to her and acquaint her with the details of what to expect once they landed. She suspected once they were off the ship and on their way

to their new home, she wouldn't find the opportunity to speak with him privately until they reached his ranch.

When she couldn't stand the suspense any longer, Rosaleen left the cabin, located Shannon, and asked her to give Blaise the message to meet her in their room as soon as possible. Then Rosaleen returned to the cabin and waited for another half hour. Still no Blaise. Finally, in a fit of anger, she left to find him. He wasn't in the dining area, but her mother said she had seen him speaking with her father on deck.

Rosaleen hurried to the deck. She soon spotted Blaise and her father, and as she approached them, she felt like a thundercloud ready to explode.

"May the Saints preserve us," Patrick mumbled as she drew closer. "Yer in trouble now, laddie."

"How intuitive ye are, Da," Rosaleen said with a smile pasted on her lips. Then she turned to Blaise. "I sent for ye an hour ago. Are ye too good to answer me summons, Mr. Cameron? I had hoped to have a few words with ye, since ye haven't given me the consideration of yer company this past week."

Blaise looked at Patrick, who said, "I'm sorry, laddie, I do not mean to keep ye. Ye two are a married couple, so I cannot step betwixt ye. I did warn ye of Rosaleen's temper."

"Then why did not ye warn me, Da, of the rudeness of the Yanks?"

"I do not understand, cailin. What are ye referrin' to?"

"Me own husband these past days has been avoidin' me. 'Tis not like a newlywed, I be thinkin'."

"Would you excuse us, Patrick? I need to speak with your daughter." Blaise turned to Rosaleen. "You're right, sweetheart. I've been preoccupied these past few days, but it hasn't be intentional."

Though he put on a good act, Rosaleen knew Blaise fumed.

on the inside. She clamped her mouth shut, wondering if she had pushed him too far.

He draped his arm around her. "It's been four years since I've been home, and I've got a lot on my mind right now. I'm also worried that maybe you won't be happy with the homestead. It's going to be run-down."

Rosaleen squirmed under his gaze. "Do not worry about that, Blaise dear. I'm sure I'll like it." She realized how close she'd come to blurting out her problems in front of her father. That would have ruined everything. Now she had to smooth things over with Blaise. "From now on, please come to me with yer problems. That's what a wife is for."

"Maybe we can finish discussing this in our cabin. If you'll excuse us again, Patrick."

"Of course, laddie." Patrick nodded at Blaise.

The moment they entered their cabin, Blaise lashed out at Rosaleen. "What the devil was that all about, Miss O'Shay? You're determined to ruin everything, aren't you? Well, you almost succeeded. Your father is no fool, you know. If you can't handle this act, tell me now. I can't be worrying about it when we get to the homestead. A slip-up like that can cost lives, Miss O'Shay."

Rosaleen started to speak, but Blaise raised his hand for silence. "I don't want to hear any excuses about your temper. You'll just have to learn to control it better than that in the company of others."

Blaise moved closer to her and lowered his voice. "And why the sudden yearning for my company, Miss O'Shay? Did you really miss me, or are you regretting our arrangement that no marriage rites were to be conducted? Well, maybe I can change that."

Though said in anger, his words were almost a caress to

Rosaleen's soul. She felt her body go weak as Blaise wrapped his arms around her. She fell back onto the bed, wrapping her arms around his neck. His lips sought hers and they fused in a lingering kiss. Eagerly, he kissed her again.

"Does this appease your loneliness, Rosaleen?" Blaise's voice was filled with emotion. "Is this what you want, darling?"

Rosaleen hated herself for giving in to the pleasure of Blaise's kisses and the closeness of his body, but she couldn't help herself. A moan of abandonment escaped her lips, and she boldly met his lips again. Her breathing quickened and she felt the bands of Blaise's arms around her.

Then, just as suddenly, he released her and stepped back from the bed. "Does that take care of any craving you may have had, Miss O'Shay, or are you willing to go further for a piece of land? After all, I'd have to forfeit my end of the bargain, wouldn't I? You'd win before we even started the game. Is that what this is all about?"

Rosaleen couldn't believe anyone would say such hateful words. Did Blaise really think so little of her—that she would sell herself for a piece of land, or for any reason? Finally, she knew where she stood in his eyes. She was merely a means to an end, a cure for a problem. That was all she would ever be to him.

Tears threatened to spill from her eyes, but Rosaleen forced them back. Then, with as much dignity as she could muster, she raised herself from the bed and slapped Blaise across the face as hard as she could. A red welt rose immediately on his cheek.

"There's yer answer, Mr. Cameron. Ye get yer job done in California, and this Irish trash will never bother ye again."

* * * * *

Blaise tried to apologize, but Rosaleen pushed him out of the cabin and slammed the door in his face. He stared at the door for several seconds, then shook his head and headed for the deck. A cool breeze welcomed him as he emerged topside. He found a quiet spot next to the railing, then leaned his elbows on the wooden bar and bowed his head. Then he stood again and banged his fist down on the railing. How could he have purposely hurt Rosaleen so much?

What a cad he was for rejecting her, yet he couldn't take advantage of her innocence when their marriage was a ruse. He knew he couldn't let her find out his true feelings for her yet; too much had to be accomplished first. But perhaps by then, Rosaleen wouldn't care about him anymore. And she'd have what she wanted—a farm for her family.

Blaise knew now that he loved Rosaleen. How could he have allowed this to happen? His love for her could put her in danger. After all, he was going after a kidnapper . . . or worse. What if Lance Kincaid used Rosaleen as a pawn against him? No, she must remain unaware of the real circumstances of his return to California. The less she and her family knew, the safer they would be. Blaise could only hope and pray Rosaleen would understand when the time came to tell her the truth—that is, if she ever listened to him again. He'd said some terrible things to her. But he had to avoid showing his true feelings for her. He shook his head in defeat. "That's all I need—another problem to worry about."

* * * * *

Not wanting to face anyone, Rosaleen stayed in the cabin until it was time to leave the ship. She went to the washbasin, emptied water from the pitcher into the bowl, and wet a cloth to

bathe her red, swollen eyes. She mustn't let anyone find out she had been crying.

An overwhelming pain filled her heart. She had expressed her feelings for Blaise with her kisses, and he'd thrown everything right back into her face. Could she be in love with Blaise Cameron? No, she decided, it was only infatuation. So why did she feel as if her heart would break into a million pieces?

Rosaleen looked at her reflection in the mirror. "Yer a stupid lass, Rosaleen Katherine. Ye knew ye'd only get hurt, but ye fell in love with him anyway. Now ye'll just have to undo it." But as she said the words, she had no idea how she could stop loving him.

She dried her tears and splashed her cheeks with cool water. She must not let Blaise know how much he had hurt her. As she glanced in the mirror one more time, she vowed to never let him make her cry again.

Rosaleen finished packing her belongings, then hurried out on deck to join her family. Finally, the clipper docked and the passengers began to disembark. Rosaleen saw Blaise approach her father and Shawn. *Let them find out what will happen next.* In her current state of mind, she didn't care if she ever spoke to Blaise again.

She went to stand with her mother, Janna, and Shannon next to the rail.

"I cannot believe we're here! Our dream is really comin' true, thanks to ye, Rosaleen. Ye can never know what this means to me and yer da." Maureen hugged her eldest daughter and then stepped back to hold her at arms' length, looking into her eyes. "Yer not yer bonny self, Rosaleen Katherine. Is somethin' wrong?"

"Nay, Mama. I'm just a wee bit nervous."

"Aye, lassie, I be feelin' the same way. We must not worry. I'm sure the good fairies are lookin' out for us even in the Wild West."

Shannon took her mother's hand. "I asked Blaise about Indians, and he said we will not have to worry about them."

"Blaise told Shawn there were mostly Chinese in San Francisco," Janna put in. "But he also said more Irish were coming. The railroad has hired a lot of immigrants to finish laying tracks from the East now that the war is over."

"That is good to hear," Maureen said. "It'll be a comfort knowin' comrades from Eire will be close by."

Rosaleen embraced her mother again. "Aye, Mama, and when the wagon train finally gets here, we'll have our beloved friends near. It'll be just like the old days in Ireland."

"Aye, Rosaleen, that it will, but we'll be on our own farms in this country. No one here will take it away from us like the English did in the old country."

"'Tis true, Mama. We'll be happy." As she said the words, Rosaleen's heart sank. Happily ever after was indeed possible, but not for her.

After several minutes, the men joined the women by the rail. Rosaleen moved away from Blaise when he came to stand near her.

Patrick smiled at his wife. "We decided, me darlin', that we'll stay to supervise the unloadin' of our belongin's, and Blaise will hurry on to find out about our fares to Stockton. After we load our thin's into a wagon, we'll meet him at the stage office. We be hopin' we can start for Stockton today or tomorrow."

"Aye, it will be good to be settled again," Mrs. O'Shay replied.

Blaise tried to kiss Rosaleen, but she turned her face so he barely grazed her cheek with his lips. "I'll see you at the stage office, Rosaleen. It'll be best for you to stay with your family. I'm not waiting for a ride into town, and the walk would be hard on you after being on the ship so long."

Rosaleen wanted to ignore him, but thought better of it with her family within earshot. “Ye forget, dear, we Irish are a hearty lot.”

Blaise cleared his throat, a forlorn expression on his face. “All the same, I’d feel better if you traveled with your family.”

If he thought he could draw sympathy from Rosaleen after what he’d done, he had another think coming! Yet as she watched him trod off, his shoulders slumped, her heart began to fill with empathy for him. Then she caught herself and quickly replaced the emotion with anger. After all, no one needed to tell her twice that she wasn’t wanted.

* * * * *

After they loaded their belongings into the rented wagon, the O’Shay clan started for their next destination. Rosaleen tried to concentrate on the surroundings, but Blaise’s dejected expression haunted her.

Rosaleen tried not to feel envious of Janna and Shawn as they held hands and exchanged loving looks. Even Rosaleen’s parents locked arms. She wondered if they all knew how fortunate they were to have their love returned.

It would be difficult to fall out of love with Blaise, but it simply had to be done. In an attempt to avoiding thinking about him, Rosaleen tried to concentrate on the sights and sounds of San Francisco. The thriving city fascinated her, and for several minutes, her melancholy lifted.

When they arrived at the stage office, Blaise arranged for their fares to Stockton and suggested they eat before leaving San Francisco. “We best eat now. I know of a great café—”

Rosaleen interrupted him. “I’d like to try Chinese food. We have never eaten it before.”

"You'll regret it later," Blaise said.

Rosaleen insisted on Chinese, and everyone enjoyed the food, especially the chow mein.

Shortly after dinner, they left San Francisco in the stagecoach. There was hardly room to breathe in the cramped seats. Rosaleen thought her bones would rattle apart with the bouncing of the coach. Clouds of dust wafted through the open windows as the coach moved swiftly along the deeply rutted dirt roads. Rosaleen and her mother tried closing the shutters, but the air grew too hot and suffocating, so they had no choice but to suffer through the dust.

Rosaleen ran her fingers over her face and felt the dirt and grime. Sweat beaded on her forehead, and rivulets of perspiration ran down the back of her neck. She coiled her heavy mane into a bun, hoping the breeze would cool her neck.

"How much longer do we have to stay in this contraption?" Rosaleen complained irritably. "I've never been more miserable in all me life."

"I'm sorry you're not enjoying the trip, dear." Blaise smiled at her. "This is the best I can offer, since the railways haven't been completed yet."

"Why must we travel so fast? It would be more comfortable if we went slower. There wouldn't be so much dust, and the coach wouldn't bounce so."

"If we went any slower, we'd never get to Stockton," Blaise answered. "As it is, we won't arrive until late tomorrow afternoon."

Rosaleen brushed the dust from her jacket and skirt. "I hope we stop soon. I need a bath and a good night's sleep."

"I'm sorry, dear, but we won't be staying long enough for that."

Rosaleen's hand hung in mid air. "What do ye mean we won't

be stoppin'?"

"We'll stop, but only long enough to acquire fresh horses and have a quick bite to eat. You'll have a few minute to stretch and walk around a bit."

Rosaleen removed her soiled gloves and placed them in her handbag. She noticed the smirk on Blaise's face and knew he was enjoying her miseries. "When is that, may I ask?"

"Oh, about midnight."

"Midnight! We cannot wait that long to eat," Rosaleen exclaimed. "I'm starvin' already."

"I tried to warn you, dear." Blaise smiled unsympathetically. "Chinese food is good, but it doesn't stay with you for very long. You take a thick, juicy beefsteak with a mound of fried spuds and onions and a loaf of fresh sourdough bread—now that's a meal that stays with you."

"Is that what we could've had?" Rosaleen's mouth began to water at the mere thought of such a hearty repast.

"Yup. I know a place in San Francisco that serves steaks three inches thick. I can almost taste one now." Blaise winked at Shawn and Patrick.

"Well, when we arrive at the relay station," Rosaleen said defiantly, "I'll order a steak and still not regret havin' the Chinese food."

"Sorry, love, but all you'll get there are beans and Mexican flaps."

Rosaleen wouldn't give in to her husband's teasing. "Oh, good. I love beans even better than steak."

"Aye, Rosaleen lives for beans, Blaise." Shawn winked at his brother-in-law.

Rosaleen threw Shawn a warning look and then tried to see out the window. It was only getting hotter in the coach, and sitting between two people made it worse.

"Shannon, trade places with me, please. I need some fresh air."

"Ye cannot do that, cailin. Blaise wouldn't like to be sittin' without ye," Patrick pointed out from across the coach.

Rosaleen smiled at Blaise, then stealthily placed her hand between his leg and hers. She gave him a painful pinch on the thigh. "Ye wouldn't care would ye, machree? Ye want to see me comfortable, do ye not?"

Blaise flinched but smiled at Rosaleen. She felt his hand move between them and pinch her thigh.

"Of course, I want to see my loving wife comfortable. Shannon doesn't need to move. I'll just go on top with the driver."

Before anyone could protest, Blaise opened the door of the fast-moving stagecoach. He stepped out, put his foot through the open window, and sprung to the top of the coach as gracefully as a cat.

Rosaleen slid into Blaise's now empty spot, keeping her eyes focused on the scenery. She knew someone was bound to say something to her, so she wasn't surprised when she heard her father speak.

"Rosaleen Katherine, what 'tis the matter with ye? Ye have been complainin' since we left San Francisco. Is somethin' ailin' ye?"

"Nay, Da. I guess I'm just tired."

"We're all tired, lassie. Ye cannot blame Blaise for that, can ye? He's a good man, yer caomhain."

"Did ye see how easily Blaise climbed out of the coach, Da?" Shannon asked in awe.

"Aye, alanna, that I did. Blaise is a good lad. Rosaleen is a lucky lass, I be thinkin'."

"Aye, me darlin'." Maureen smiled at her husband as she looked fondly at Janna. "So is Shawn, to find such a sweet girl."

“Aye, me darlin’. We did indeed have the luck of the Irish when it came to findin’ mates for these children. I’m a happy man this day.”

With Blaise riding on top of the stagecoach with the driver, the hours seemed to drag for Rosaleen. What a fickle lass she was! She didn’t want Blaise around, but when he was gone, she missed him.

When darkness finally came, Rosaleen decided to try to sleep so the time would pass more quickly. Blessedly, she soon grew accustomed to the rhythm of the coach and fell into deep slumber.

Several hours later, the O’Shay clan was jarred awake by men shouting. Rosaleen opened her eyes and moaned at the aching in her joints and neck.

Suddenly, the coach stopped and the door flew open. The driver barked at them to get out and eat while he changed the team. Rosaleen begrudgingly stepped out of the coach and followed her family to a small shack.

True to Blaise’s words, the relay station served only beans. Rosaleen didn’t complain, though. The hot beans were good, and the fresh, crusty bread had an odd, tangy taste. Blaise said it was called sourdough.

All too soon, the driver hollered for them to reboard the stagecoach. Shawn insisted on riding on top so Blaise could get some rest. Without argument, Blaise got in the coach, glancing at Rosaleen beside him. Then he sighed and stared into the darkness outside.

Once they were on their way, everyone settled back to sleep. With Blaise so close, Rosaleen found it difficult to relax, though she kept nodding off to sleep despite herself.

“Rosaleen, can you hear me?”

Her eyes popped open at Blaise’s whisper.

"I know you're awake, Rosaleen Katherine. Every time you drop off to sleep your head falls against my shoulder, so don't pretend."

"What do ye want?"

Blaise leaned closer. Rosaleen could feel his breath on her cheek.

"I want to warn you, young lady, that you best not pinch, scratch, bite, claw, or kick me again. If you do, I'm turning you over my knee and giving you what your parents should have given you years ago. Do I make myself clear?"

"What are ye complainin' about? Ye got even," Rosaleen whispered angrily.

"I'm not going to play your silly little games. I'm a grown man, not one of your wee Irish boyfriends. You act like a child again, and I'll punish you like a child. Understand?"

Blaise's words sounded more like a statement than a question. Rosaleen clenched her jaw, forcing herself not to shout at him. If she were a man, she'd show him a thing or two. The longer she sat there, the madder she became, especially when she heard his even breathing. Here she was, mad as ever at him, and he had the audacity to sleep through it. If she were only strong enough to fight him, she'd beat the stuffing out of him.

Rosaleen soon felt herself dropping off to sleep again. Slowly, her head drifted toward Blaise's shoulder, but she awoke with a start. Finally, she gave up and rested her head on his shoulder, then fell into a deep sleep with pleasant dreams.

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Blaise felt the weight of Rosaleen's head on his shoulder and awoke. With a smile to himself, he gently moved so he could put his arm around her to try to cushion her from the worst bounces.

Rosaleen moaned and snuggled closer to him.

What would it hurt to give in a little? Rosaleen would never know. Contentedly, Blaise held her close. Just as he started to drift off, Blaise heard Rosaleen mumble, “Blaise, gramachree, *mise goal sibhse*.” Those infernal foreign words again! He’d have to find out what dastardly names she called him even in her sleep.

SIXTEEN



“Rosaleen, darling, wake up,” Blaise murmured softly in her ear. “We’re almost at the next relay station. Are you hungry?”

She yawned and opened her eyes. How did she get in Blaise’s arms, and why was he speaking so kindly to her? She looked around and saw the smiling faces of her family. Then it dawned on her that the sweet endearments were for her family’s benefit. Rosaleen quickly extricated herself from Blaise’s embrace. What must he think after finding her in his arms? Well, she wouldn’t give him the satisfaction of knowing how mortified she felt.

The coach jerked, pitching the occupants forward, and then stopped. Loud shouts greeted the driver and the passengers as a group of men rushed towards them to prepare the coach for the remainder of the trip to Stockton.

Rosaleen allowed Blaise to help her down from the coach. Her back ached and her neck felt stiff and sore. It felt wonderful to move after sitting so long in the crowded, bumpy coach. Once the family members stretched and walked a bit, they gratefully washed and made use of the facilities out back before starting

another meal of beans and sourdough bread. Either Rosaleen wasn't hungry or the beans had been reheated too many times. She wished she had one of those thick, juicy steaks Blaise had bragged about. With a frown, she set her fork down next to her plate. She couldn't eat.

"You better eat, dear," Blaise said as Rosaleen left the table. "It's at least another eight hours to Stockton."

"I'll manage."

Blaise shrugged. "Suit yourself."

Rosaleen left the relay station in search of a drink of fresh, cool water. She washed her face and hands again and brushed her hair, pinning it into a bun again. Her mood did improve a bit after she removed some of the dust.

Shawn and Blaise changed places again, giving Shawn a chance to rest in the coach. The hours dragged by with nothing to do but sit and look out the window. The O'Shay clan read scriptures aloud, sang a few hymns, and napped in the afternoon.

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When Shannon woke from her nap, she was in no mood to sit still. She fidgeted and complained until she vexed everyone. Blaise felt just as bored and wished he had a novel to read. He was relieved when Patrick spoke.

"Shannon, how about I tell ye a fairy tale from Eire? Ye loved the old stories when ye were a wee one."

"Oh, Da!" Shannon said eagerly. "Aye, tell me a fairy tale! I want to hear *The Prideful Princess*!"

"Nay, nay, Da," Rosaleen interrupted, glancing at Blaise. "Not *The Prideful Princess*. Tell a story about leprechauns, changelin's, or pookas. I'm sure Blaise will find a fairy tale borin' indeed."

Rosaleen's reluctance aroused Blaise's curiosity. "On the contrary, I'd love to hear a good fairy tale." Blaise swallowed a grin at Rosaleen's sour expression. "Would you like to tell the story, darling?"

She squirmed in her seat. "Nay, Da can tell it, although I'd much rather hear a story about the wee people than a silly story about a princess."

Maureen clicked her tongue. "Rosaleen Katherine, ye loved *The Prideful Princess* when ye were a wee child. And I'm sure Janna would love to hear a love story about a beautiful princess."

"I love fairy tales," Janna said softly. "My mother told me bedtime stories when I was a little girl."

"Since I'm tellin' the story" —Patrick held his hand in the air for silence— "I choose the story Shannon suggested." Then he began.

Once upon a time there was a mighty king who ruled his clan in County Killarney. He had a daughter who was the most beautiful lass that could be seen in all of Eire. She had the fairest complexion, the softest hair, and eyes as green as emeralds.

Alas, Princess Ailis had one great fault. She was as proud as the devil himself. The king invited every prince, duke, and earl to Castle McAnally, hoping one of them would win the heart of his prideful daughter. His large estate, fine castle with beautiful gardens, and an abundance of tenants was a great prize. He was sure one of his guests would overlook his daughter's haughty attitude.

The royal guests did everything they could to win the hand of the fair Princess Ailis. They brought her

fine gifts; they whispered, "Mise goal sibhse" in her ear. They promised her great riches and swore to adore her all of her days.

Even though the suitors were very handsome and rich, Princess Ailis demanded they leave Castle McAnally, calling them cockscombs and dandies.

All of the grand suitors left, defeated. The king was so vexed with Princess Ailis that he swore he would punish her for her arrogance. "Ye will leave this castle and work as a servant for King Liam.

The princess yelled and cursed the day she was born. The king refused to listen, and he had a peasant load her unto a cart and take her to Castle Killarney.

When they arrived at a small cottage, Princess Ailis asked angrily, "Where have ye taken me, peasant man?"

The peasant, whose red hair and beard were long and shaggy, answered with respect, "'Tis but me humble cottage, my lady. 'Tis here ye shall be stayin'."

Princess Ailis began to cry. She was very tired, hungry, and quiet without her clan near her.

When she entered the cottage, she began to weep again. Not a stick of comfortable furniture was to be found, and there was not even a warm fire with a pot of steaming lamb stew to fill her hunger. "I cannot stay here!" Princess Ailis sobbed. "There's neither food nor a comfortable bed to sleep upon."

The shaggy peasant pointed to a basket next to the old table. "There are enough vegetables to sustain ye. You'll find a crock with lamb's broth in it in the creek through the forest."

When the redheaded peasant man turned to leave,

the princess demanded he fetch the broth and make her a fine soup.

"Nay, my lady," he said humbly. "The master said ye were to fend for yerself. I'll be back in the morn to fetch ye to the castle of King Liam."

The princess pleaded, "Do not leave me here alone! The wild beasts of the forest will have me for their supper!"

"'Tis no beasts here, my lady. Ye will be fine. But do not leave the cottage when the sun goes down, for if ye do, the pookas and giants will surely find ye."

Frightened by the peasant's warning, Princess Ailis refused to leave the cabin for the lamb's broth. She was too tired and hungry to build a fire, so she ate a few of the raw vegetables for her supper and crawled onto a tick mattress in the corner of the cottage next to the cold hearth.

It seemed only minutes had passed when she heard a knock at the door. Princess Ailis cowered in the corner.

"'Tis me, my lady. I've come to fetch ye to King Liam's castle. The cook needs yer help in the kitchen."

Princess Ailis breathed a sigh of relief. She quickly opened the door and bid the bearded peasant good morn. "Did ye bring me any food to eat, peasant man? I'm quite famished and unable to cook for meself."

"Nay, my lady, I cannot feed ye. Maybe the cook will have a few scraps of food for ye."

The princess wanted to pout and demand that he feed her, but she was too hungry. She would order the king's cook to provide a meal for her.

When Princess Ailis left the cottage she expected

a carriage, or at least the cart they had traveled on, to take her to the castle. "Peasant man, how do ye expect me to journey to the castle? I see no carriage or cart."

"We will walk through the forest, my lady. 'Twill not take long, and ye are young and in good health."

The peasant led the way through the forest with the miserable Princess Ailis trailing after him, muttering to herself as the tree branches pulled at her hair and tore her fine dress.

When they reached the castle of King Liam, the kind peasant led the tired princess to the kitchen. Princess Ailis couldn't help but notice the beautiful furnishings and exquisite artisanship of the castle. It would be nice to be mistress of a fine castle like this, she thought. Why didn't her father ask King Liam to court her? It was too late now to have such grand dreams. She would probably have to marry the horrid, bearded peasant man and live in his humble cottage.

Every day the princess cleaned and helped the cook prepare the king's meals. She would return to the small cottage in the evening exhausted and barely able to bid the peasant man farewell.

After several weeks, the princess noticed she wasn't quite as tired at the end of the day and was able to prepare meals for herself. She even took an interest in cleaning the small cottage until it was cheerful and welcoming. The peasant man visited often and the princess became very fond of him. She often asked his name and he only shook his head. "The master forbids it."

One bright summer morn, the princess arrived at

the castle to find a great hubbub of activity. "What goes here? Why such a frenzy?" she asked the cook.

"King Liam is getting married today!" the cook announced with great zeal. "We must fix a great feast for the king and his new bride. Every chieftain in Ireland will be attending!"

Princess Ailis was stunned. Surely, her father would seek her out when he came to attend the great celebration. She looked at her shabby clothes, worn shoes, and unkempt hair. She was no longer Princess Ailis of Castle McAnally. She was a poor peasant lass. Her father would be ashamed at how she had humbled herself since leaving home.

The princess dashed away the tears, sorrowful at how proud she was once. Her punishment was hard to bear. "What do ye want me to do, Cook? Shall I prepare the pastries and the puddings King Liam loves so much?"

The cook scurried about the kitchen, giving orders to the scullery maids as she went. "Nay, nay, lass. The master has ordered ye to attend his wedding. He wishes for the chieftains to see how well ye have fared."

Princess Ailis couldn't believe her own ears. "Surely, ye are mistaken, Cook. I would be an embarrassment to him as well as his guests. I'm just a poor scullery maid in shabby clothes."

"He demands it, lass." Cook beckoned a maid. "Take Princess Ailis to the bedchamber the master has prepared. Help her bathe and dress for the wedding. No doddling, now."

The maid whisked Princess Ailis to a high tower in the castle. She helped her bathe in heather-scented

water and then washed her hair and dried it by the fire. When it was time to dress, Princess Ailis cried with delight at the golden dress sewed with silver and gold thread and an overlay of the finest Irish lace that could be found in the entire kingdom. Gold slippers with exquisite embroidery adorned her tiny feet. The maid then fashioned her hair with gold and silver braiding, and tiny flowers crowned her head like a halo. She cried with joy when she gazed into the looking glass.

"I'm Princess Ailis again," she wept.

"Yer clothes do not make ye a princess," the maid said.

A knock at the door brought the princess back to reality. She bade the servant to enter.

"'Tis time for the wedding to commence, my lady. The king is anxious for everyone to meet in the chapel."

When Princess Ailis arrived at the chapel, she expected to sit with her father, but she was taken to the altar instead. Everyone ceased to speak and then King Liam entered the chapel. She had never met the king before and was taken aback by his countenance. His eyes looked familiar, but she couldn't place him. When he joined her at the altar, Princess Ailis lowered her head in humble respect and gave her best curtsy. "I'm sorry, Your Majesty. I was directed to stand by the altar. Please forgive my intrusion."

As Princess Ailis stepped back, the king stopped her. "You are not intruding, my lady. 'Tis ye I intend to marry, if ye accept me."

Princess Ailis gasped. "I do not understand, Your Majesty. I am nothing but a scullery maid in yer

kitchen."

"And I was once a peasant man who lived in a humble cottage."

A smile formed on the king's lips. Princess Ailis's heart leaped for joy. Could it be true? Could her peasant man indeed be King Liam?

The shaggy hair and beard were gone, the ragged clothes replaced with silk and satin. However, the kind eyes and humble bearing remained.

"'Tis a dream come true, Your Majesty. I am a princess, for yer kindness and patience has humbled me. I loved ye as a peasant man and I love ye as King Liam."

King Liam and Queen Ailis lived happily ever after. Queen Ailis learned the true meaning of being a princess. It wasn't the fine clothing that made her a princess. It was what was in her heart.

THE END

"And the moral of the story is that ye do not always know what is best for yerself." Patrick winked at Rosaleen. "Sometimes it takes a wee bit of a shove to help ye along the way."

Blaise noticed the grim look on Rosaleen's face. Was she comparing her life to that of the prideful princess, only without the happy ending? "What did the suitors say to the princess when they spoke in her ear?"

"*Mise goal sibhse?*" Patrick inquired.

Blaise nodded.

"Each of the suitors whispered, 'I love you.'"

Blaise couldn't believe it. Rosaleen hadn't called him dastardly names in her sleep; she had said she loved him! Rosaleen loved him and she was miserable about it. How he

wished he could take her in his arms and express his love to her. Patience—he needed patience. The right time would come soon. “What a nice fairy tale, Patrick. It’s nice to know that love can come from an unfortunate beginning.”

Rosaleen looked at Blaise. “As ye said, ’tis a fairy tale. Since when is real life a fairy tale?”

“You’d be surprised, darling.” Blaise felt happy for the first time since before the war.

SEVENTEEN



Blaise sat next to the driver, relieved to be riding on top of the coach instead of inside. It was too tempting having Rosaleen so close. When she had rested her head on his shoulder, it had somehow felt *right*.

Rosaleen loves me. A lump filled Blaise's throat. If only he could tell her he loved her as well. But he couldn't court his wild Irish Rose until he found his parents. There was also Lance Kincaid to reckon with.

Blaise thought of his friend Jonas. He had left San Francisco before the stagecoach, assuring Blaise he would be fine. Blaise received the messages Jonas had left for him at each stage station. Jonas explained that he had stopped only long enough to change horses and grab a bite to eat. Blaise felt guilty that the friend he proudly fought next to in the war had to ride the entire distance on horseback instead of by coach. How would he ever repay Jonas for his sacrifices?

Finally, they made it to Stockton. Rosaleen looked out the window at this, the closest town to their new home. Stockton was small, more of a cow town than a bustling city. There was no smog like in Pittsburgh, and the streets were clean. The quaintness of the place reminded her of the small villages in Ireland.

"I don't think we'll have to work in a tavern here, Rosaleen," Janna teased as the coach rolled through town.

Shawn frowned.

"Do not fret so, Shawn," Rosaleen smiled. "I have no plans of findin' employment."

"I should say not, Rosaleen Katherine, with a husband to care for," Maureen said.

"Aye, Mama." At the reminder, Rosaleen lapsed into silence.

When the coach rolled to a stop, Rosaleen and her family climbed out and inspected their new surroundings. They were tired, hungry, and dusty, but they had finally arrived in Stockton. Blaise thought the whole lot seemed pleased with the town.

Blaise and Shawn rented a buckboard at the livery stable, and everyone helped load the baggage onto the wagon. As Patrick O'Shay leaned against the wagon to catch his breath, Blaise noticed his father-in-law's pale complexion. The older man rubbed his injured leg, and Blaise wondered if Patrick had removed the splints too soon.

Rosaleen didn't say much, which made Blaise nervous. What kind of a mess did he get himself into, bringing all of these people west? He had to see them settled before he left to find Jonas.

With his handkerchief, Blaise wiped the sweat from inside the brim of his Stetson. "I know you all must be tired and hungry,

so why don't we go to the boarding house for some decent food? Then you can get an early start tomorrow morning."

Patrick shook his head. "I'm sorry, laddie. We'll get our supplies and head out tonight."

Blaise placed his hat back on his head and tied the handkerchief around his neck. "As you wish, sir, but please have a bite to eat first."

"Nay, we'll cook somethin' over the fire tonight. We're anxious to be settled again, aren't we, Maureen?"

"Aye, we are, Patrick, but Blaise, ye and Rosaleen do not have to go without a decent night's rest because of us."

"Have ye forgotten what I told ye, Mama?" Rosaleen said. "Blaise is goin' on ahead, and we're to follow."

A weary smile flitted across Maureen's face. "Aye, yer right, lass. I forgot."

"I hate to see you leave without anything to eat, especially since your meal is already paid for." When Patrick gave him a confused look, Blaise continued, "A meal and a night's lodging at the boarding house is included in your coach fare. It's the only decent meal on the entire trip. I'm sure Mrs. Buckley, if she still owns it, would love to meet you. I've known her all my life. I'm afraid she'd be hurt if I didn't take my wife to meet her. You wouldn't want to start gossip that you're unsociable, would you? Being Irish is going to be hard enough here, and you need all the friends you can get."

Patrick rubbed his grizzled chin. "What do ye think, Maureen? Would ye like to stay the night?"

Maureen sighed. "Aye, me darlin'. 'Twould be nice to sleep in a bed that does not sway or bump. A home-cooked meal and a hot bath sound lovely too."

"Aye, Da," Shawn said. "I think we all need a good night's sleep."

“I want to stay, Da. I’m hungry,” Shannon put in.

Rosaleen linked an arm with her father’s. “I agree too, Da. We’ll all feel better tomorrow. There’s no sense gettin’ so tuckered that we cannot unload the wagon when we arrive at the ranch.”

Patrick smiled. “Then it’s done. We’ll spend the night in town also. I have to admit, I’m a bit done in meself.”

During the short ride to Mrs. Buckley’s boarding house, Blaise looked down the dusty streets of the town he hadn’t seen for over four years. Long-forgotten memories rushed through him. He remembered dashing through the streets with his playmates, playing tag or kick the can.

He couldn’t help but remember the joyous times he’d spent with his family in this small town—the church socials, the square dancing in a neighbor’s barn, and the Fourth of July fireworks at the town fairgrounds. But the memories Blaise cherished most were the times his father took him to the livestock shows—those rare times when it was just him and his father.

Were memories of his parents all Blaise would have? A lump formed in his throat at the thought of never seeing them again, of never having the chance to tell his mother and father how much he loved them.

Blaise felt Rosaleen’s soft hand stroke his cheek, brushing away the wetness he hadn’t realized was there. He turned to look into her eyes and gently placed his hand over hers.

“Please let me help,” she said, her eyes bright with emotion.

Blaise brought Rosaleen’s hand to his lips and kissed it softly, his eyes never leaving hers.

“Mise goal sibhse,” she said in a barely audible whisper.

Blaise opened his mouth to tell her his own feelings but then stopped himself. “Rosaleen, please understand. I can’t tell you how I feel right now, but I promise I’ll explain everything soon.”

At Rosaleen's frown, Blaise jumped over the side of the wagon and dashed away.

Rosaleen watched Blaise's retrieving form in a daze. In a moment of compassion, she had revealed her innermost feelings to Blaise—and he had rejected her. *How could I throw myself at him like that! Thank goodness, I spoke my words of love in Gaelic.*

She felt her cheeks burn at the thought of facing Blaise, knowing he didn't share her feelings. Why didn't she just leave well enough alone? She certainly would not repeat her mistake. Blaise Cameron could just divorce her and leave her alone.

"Where's the proprietor of this establishment?" Blaise yelled as he entered the boarding house. "I want a room, pronto!"

A string of angry Spanish words came from the vicinity of the kitchen. Seconds later, a short, plump, Spanish woman came charging into the foyer, wiping her hands on her apron. When she saw Blaise, her jaw dropped and she stopped.

Blaise laughed. "Is that all the welcome I get from my favorite Tia Margarita?"

"Senor Blaise!" The woman ran to Blaise with outstretched arms, tears screaming down her cheeks. "Are you really home? I heard you were alive, and I've been praying you'd return home."

As Blaise kissed the older woman on the cheek, he smelled cinnamon, fresh tortillas, and rose hips. "Of course, I would come home, Tia Margarita. I've been waiting four long years for one of

your home-cooked meals.”

“Oh, Senor Blaise.” Senora Buckley blushed with pride. “You haven’t changed one bit, have you? Well, come into the kitchen, and I’ll put some meat on those sorry bones of yours. You look like one of them skeletons I saw once with a traveling circus.”

Senora Buckley turned toward the kitchen but Blaise stopped her. “Wait a minute, Tia Margarita, I’ve got a surprise. She’s waiting outside.”

“She?”

Blaise herded his friend out the front door to the steps of the boarding house, where the O’Shays waited. One by one, he made the introductions, purposely leaving Rosaleen for last.

“And this is my wife, Rosaleen Katherine O’Shay Cameron.”

Senora Buckley stood before Rosaleen with a shocked look on her face. “When did you find the time to court such a beauty while you were fighting the war, Senor Blaise?”

Laughing, Blaise stood next to Rosaleen and placed his arm around her small waist. “What can I say, Tia Margarita? Rosaleen stole my heart from the first moment I saw her.”

“Oh, you masher, Senor Blaise. You don’t deserve such a pretty little senorita.”

“Little girl? Never, Tia Margarita. Rosaleen is all woman.” Blaise grinned and then winked at Rosaleen.

“Now look what you did, Senor. You’re embarrassing your pretty bride.” Senora Buckley smiled at Rosaleen. “Don’t let Senor Blaise’s flirtations upset you, Senora Cameron. He is a big tease.” She gave Rosaleen a welcoming hug. “I’m not really Senor Blaise’s aunt, but he’s called me ‘tia’ since he was a bambino.” The older woman smiled and looked deeply into Rosaleen’s eyes. “Welcome to Stockton, Senora Cameron, and your family also. And congratulations on your marriage to Senor Blaise. I shouldn’t

say this in his presence, but you married a good hombre. I wish you much happiness.”

“Thank ye, Senora Buckley, for yer most kind words of welcome,” Rosaleen said sincerely. “Me family is honored to make yer acquaintance.”

“Me daughter speaks the truth, Senora Buckley. ’Tis nice to have a friend such as ye already.” With one arm, Patrick drew Maureen to his side.

“This land is new to us, but we hope to make our home here.” Maureen smiled fondly at her husband.

“You’re welcome here, Senora O’Shay,” Senora Buckley said. “But where are my manners? Please come in.”

As she accompanied the O’Shays into the entry hall, Senora Buckley called out for her daughters. In a snap, four pretty Spanish señoritas stood before their mother. Senora Buckley gave orders in rapid Spanish, and her daughters dashed to do as their mother instructed.

“Baths are being prepared for each of you. Dinner will be ready after your siesta.”

“Nap,” Blaise said when he saw his in-laws’ confused expressions. Smiling at Rosaleen, he added, “Now you know I feel when you talk in the Irish.”

Wrinkling her nose, Rosaleen ignored him and followed Senora Buckley to where they were to bathe.

After the O’Shays were settled, Blaise went to the kitchen and poured himself a cup of coffee. Slowly, he eased his body in the nearest chair and sipped the hot liquid.

Senora Buckley waited until her daughter Marta left to pick fresh vegetables from the garden for dinner before bombarding Blaise with questions.

“Wait a minute, tia, one question at a time.” Blaise waved his arms in surrender.

"There are many questions I have of your marriage, Senor Blaise, but they'll keep. Senora Cameron is very sweet and pretty. You love her very much, yes?"

"Yes, tia, I love Rosaleen very much," Blaise answered with a chuckle.

"That is good, Senor Blaise. I have seen you grow from a little niño, and my heart is happy that you're finally settling down."

Preoccupied, Blaise forced himself to concentrate on Senora Buckley's words.

"You haven't asked about your parents yet, Senor Blaise. Something evil goes on at the Buckshot Ranch. I sense these things." Senora Buckley's eyes went wide. Then she crossed herself and said a little prayer. "Did you know your parents haven't been seen by anybody for a long time? No one can even get on the ranch. This gringo, Lance Kincaid, will not allow it. He says Senor and Senora Cameron are away, but they've been away a long time, Senor Blaise. I've been frightened for them, but what could I do? Since Marshall Simms left for the war, the new marshal just ignores Senor Kincaid's wrongdoings. Poor Senor and Senora Walters are heartbroken over their daughter. You must not stay here, Senor Blaise. You must take your bride and leave this place."

"What happened to Mary Walters? Did she die?"

"No, senor, she is not dead, but she may as well be," Senora Buckley replied sadly, shaking her head. "She hasn't been the same since Senor Kincaid made her his woman. I think he has cast a spell on her."

Blaise felt his body tense with the confirmation that something was indeed wrong at the ranch. He was grateful he already formulated a story; otherwise, it would be difficult to fool Senora Buckley.

"Don't worry, Tia Margarita, Mother and Father are safe in

Europe. They can settle the matter of Lance Kincaid when they return. I don't want anything to do with the ranch. I have plans of my own."

"I'm relieved to hear that, Senor Blaise, but what plans do you have if not the Buckshot Ranch?"

"I'm going to turn the old homestead into a working ranch, with the help of the O'Shays. I just want to mind my own business and take care of my wife and her family."

"Did the war make you loco, Senor Blaise?" Senora Buckley asked suspiciously. "You would have never backed down to the likes of Kincaid before the war."

Blaise felt a niggling of shame at his dishonesty. He prayed the Lord would understand. "I've seen enough fighting and killing over the past four years to last a lifetime. As long as my parents are safe in Europe, Kincaid can run the ranch. After all, Father left him in charge. I'm not going to override his decision."

"Just the same, be careful of Lance Kincaid, Senor Blaise. He has many friends that will do as he asks. The decent families around Stockton don't have anything to do with that gringo. They are afraid that what happened to your parents will happen to them. Everyone knows what he did to your sister, Amanda, and what happened to Mary Walters confirms their suspicion."

Blaise knew a herd of buffalo couldn't drag a confidence from Margarita Buckley. He preferred telling her the truth, but he didn't want to take any chances or put her and her daughters in jeopardy.

"Well, Mother and Father are fine, and, as far as Mandy goes, she exaggerates. She was hurt when she found out about Mary, so she left to go back east. You can tell everyone all is well at the Buckshot Ranch."

Senora Buckley nodded and went on with her cooking. Blaise rose from the table. He needed to check on Jonas without

drawing attention to himself. "I better clean up too. I'd like to browse around town after dinner."

As Blaise started to leave, Senora Buckley stopped him. "I almost forgot to tell you. A man came looking for you a few days ago. He said he was a friend from the war."

Blaise tried to conceal his surprise. "Did he give his name?"

"Si, Senor Blaise. Peterson, Sergeant Ross Peterson. Do you know him?"

Ross arrived in California on schedule, Blaise thought. "Did he say where I could find him?"

"At Fort Sutter."

"I can't quite place the name," Blaise lied. "I met a lot of soldiers during the war. But I can't go all the way back to the fort today, so it'll have to keep for now."

After dinner that evening, Blaise left the boarding house. On route to rendezvous with Jonas, he could have shouted with joy. What luck—Ross at Fort Sutter! Blaise's good friend was just the ally he needed on the outside. Hopefully, Ross could convince the commanding officer at Fort Sutter that Blaise needed their help with Kincaid and his men.

When Blaise arrived at the meeting place, he informed Jonas of the new developments involving Ross Peterson, who waited at Fort Sutter for Blaise to contact him.

"I'm telling you, Jonas, if I can get the army's cooperation, it'll be no time at all before this entire mess is cleared up. I can have my family safely out of danger and finally be able to tell my wife the truth."

"Dat's a good ider, Mista Cameron. Does y'all want me to goes and fetch Sergeant Peterson for you?"

"Not this time, Jonas. I may have to convince the army they would gain as much as I would by apprehending Lance Kincaid."

Blaise handed Jonas a knapsack filled with food. "Are you going to be all right out here by yourself tonight?"

"Yes, Mista Cameron, I's fine now I have some vittles."

Blaise grinned. "I brought the food from the boarding house. I thought you'd appreciate a woman's cooking for a change."

The two friends sat in a copse of trees while Jonas ate his dinner. "Early tomorrow morning, the O'Shays are heading for the homestead. As soon as they leave, I'll meet you here and we'll go to Fort Sutter together."

"I's fine, Mista Cameron. I's a little scart, but I'll be fine. I am going to be powerful glad when this hiding and such is over. It reminds me too much of de war."

Blaise could see the fright in Jonas's large brown eyes as they shone brightly in the light of the campfire. "I understand your fear, Jonas. This whole country is foreign to you. Just remember, though, what we're doing is even more dangerous than the war. This time, we don't know who our enemies are. We have to be very careful. There are many people depending on us."

* * * * *

Rosaleen paced the bedroom floor. The longer she waited for Blaise, the angrier she grew. *How dare he leave immediately after dinner and stay away all night, especially tonight!* she thought. It would be their last night together until he arrived at the homestead, and who knew when that would be. Men could be so inconsiderate when it came to a woman's feelings. Rosaleen decided to follow through with her original plan—Blaise Cameron was going to have to divorce her. No simple annulment would do now.

Rosaleen plopped herself down on the bed in frustration. With a sigh, she decided it would be best if Blaise didn't come home and find her waiting up for him like an eager wife.

No sooner had she said her prayers and blown out the lamp when she heard someone quietly open the door. Rosaleen opened her eyes and, in the moonlight, recognized Blaise's silhouette. She watched him as he fumbled about in the semi-darkness.

Blaise stood next to the bed as he peeled off his clothes down to his long-handled underwear. Then he climbed in next to Rosaleen.

She held her breath. She heard her heart pounding, and she feared Blaise could hear it as well. She felt Blaise's thigh as he brushed up against her. Since he had stayed out so late, Rosaleen assumed she would smell liquor and cheap perfume on him, but the only aromas she detected were leather and shaving lotion.

I'm not ready yet, Rosaleen thought frantically. *It sounded so good a half an hour ago, but I need more courage.*

"Get out of me bed, ye *beadagan*! Ye'll not *beadradh* with me, ye weasel."

Blaise's voice sounded drowsy as though he had already drifted off to sleep. "For pity sake, Rosaleen Katherine. What's the matter now? I'm tired and I want to go to sleep."

"Ye'll not be sleepin' in me bed. Ye'll not be performin' yer debauched ways with me."

Blaise laughed out loud. "Where do you hear such things, Rosaleen? In cheap dime-store novels? Don't worry, your honor is safe with me, so be a good girl and go to sleep."

Rosaleen began to fume at his indifference. How dare he be such a gentleman with his wife! Well, she wouldn't stand for it. "I be knowin' what's on yer wicked mind, Mr. Cameron. Now be gone with ye!"

Blaise punched his pillow several times before resting his head on it again. "For the last time, I'm not budging, Rosaleen Katherine. I'm going to have a decent night's sleep regardless of what you say. You can have the floor if you're that worried about

your chastity. Otherwise, go to sleep.” Without another word, Blaise rolled over and went to sleep.

Rosaleen grabbed a quilt and a pillow and made a bed on the floor. She tried to sleep but felt miserable. It seemed as if her plan had backfired on her, but she wouldn’t give in for anything, not even for the divorce. Not tonight, anyway.

EIGHTEEN



Rosaleen woke early to the smell of ham frying. She stretched and yawned, too comfortable to move from the soft feather bed. A knock came at the door, and she heard her father say, "Rosaleen, me darlin', time's a wastin'. We need to be gettin' on our way to the homestead."

Reluctantly, she started to rise. Then she remembered last night. Hadn't she been sleeping on the floor? How did she end up on the bed? She opened her eyes a peek and saw Blaise lying next to her, grinning at her as he rested his head against the palm of his hand. Rosaleen felt her face turn red.

"Five minutes."

Rosaleen's brows furrowed. "What are you talkin' about?"

"I wondered how long it would take you to realize you weren't alone. It took five minutes. Kind of a slow observer, aren't you?"

"How dare ye make light of this!" Rosaleen shrieked as she practically flew from the bed. "I'd like to know how I

came to be in bed with the likes of ye.”

“Yes, it is odd isn’t it? I mean, finding yourself in your husband’s bed,” Blaise replied nonchalantly.

“Ye know what I be meanin’, Blaise Cameron! What did ye do, put me in yer bed after I fell asleep?”

“No, my green-eyed enchantress. I was just as surprised as you were when I woke and found you snuggled against me like a contented kitten.”

Rosaleen had no memory of climbing into the bed, or of being carried there, either. “I must have walked in me sleep, or maybe I was cold.”

“I wonder,” Blaise said with a smirk.

“Ye infuriatin’ oaf! Get out of here so I can get dressed.”

“Must I?” When Rosaleen reached for a vase on the dresser, Blaise jumped from the bed. “Okay, okay, I’m leaving! Let me at least put on my pants. You and your Irish temper. One of these days, you’re going to push me too far.”

“Bah! Ye do not scare me with yer threats. I can take care of meself, bucko, and don’t ye forget it.”

After grabbing the rest of his clothes, Blaise opened the door. “Remember those words, Rosaleen dear. They may come back to haunt you.” With that, he left.

“Oh, that man! How could I love such a rogue? I must be daft.”

While the O’Shay party ate breakfast, Blaise gave them directions to the homestead. Then the men loaded the buckboard with the supplies Blaise had purchased in Stockton the previous night. As they all stood before the loaded wagon, Patrick looked at the abundance of goods and frowned.

"Now, Patrick, I know what you must be thinking—" Blaise began.

"Aye, I be thinkin' we need to help pay for all of these supplies. I've never taken charity from anyone, and I'm not about to start now. The Lord has provided enough funds for us to pay our way."

"Aye, Blaise, I feel the same way as Da. I can take care of me wife." Shawn put his arm around Janna.

As Blaise squirmed under the scrutiny of Rosaleen's family, he noticed her smug expression. It appeared she liked his discomfort, the minx.

"It's not charity I offer. Rosaleen and I have to eat too, don't we? Well, I want to pay our way. If you don't accept my help, then I can't accept your help on the homestead. We're partners. At least, I thought we were."

Patrick and Shawn exchanged glances. "Puttin' it that way, lad, we accept. I be havin' a few bob of me own in me pocket, so I will be buyin' some livestock for the farm. I'll not be takin' no for an answer on that." Patrick stared at Blaise determinedly. "And by the way, I be hopin' ye will call me Da, laddie." Patrick placed his hand on Blaise's shoulder.

"Maybe just Patrick for now," Blaise said hoarsely.

"Aye, Blaise, we all feel the same as Da." Shawn slapped Blaise on the back. "Yer part of the family now."

Guilt filled Blaise's very soul as he felt Rosaleen's eyes on him. How could he dupe the O'Shays? Yes, he was compensating them, but somehow that knowledge didn't untie the knot in his stomach.

After they exchanged good-byes with Senora Buckley and her daughters, Janna and Shawn climbed into the buckboard with the supplies, while the rest of the party climbed into a second wagon Blaise had hired.

Rosaleen headed for the rear of the wagon, making her way around the barrels and boxes of supplies before finding a comfortable place to sit. Senora Buckley handed her a large basket of food, and each of her daughters handed Mrs. O'Shay an armful of sheets and bedding.

"We cannot accept these, Senora Buckley. 'Tis much too generous."

Senora Buckley held up her hand to stop Maureen's protest. "The bedding is very worn and cannot be used for the boarding house. I was going to tear the sheets into cleaning rags. As for the basket of food, you will be hungry before you reach the ranch. If we are to be amigos, you must accept my offering or I will be insulted."

By the smile on Senora Buckley's face, Rosaleen knew no one had dared deny her.

Maureen reached down from the wagon seat to embrace Senora Buckley. "Thanks to good friends such as ye, I am sure we will survive in this new land. Please come and visit us soon. Yer always welcome."

While Maureen and Senora Buckley finished their farewells, Blaise took the opportunity to speak with Rosaleen alone. Standing on the rungs of the wagon wheel, he whispered, "Don't be alarmed if I don't show up at the farm for a few days. There's a lot I have to do now that I'm home." Then he added for all to hear, "I'll miss you, darling." He planted a kiss on Rosaleen's stubborn mouth before she had a chance to turn away.

"What makes ye think I'd be worried over the likes of ye?" Rosaleen whispered before Blaise jumped to the ground.

As the wagon pulled away, Blaise shouted, "Because your eyes give you away, darling."

* * * * *

Rosaleen watched Blaise until he was out of sight. She leaned her back against the side of the wagon. Her eyes gave her away, indeed!

"Ye look as mad as an old black thundercloud, Rosaleen," Shannon said from the other side of the wagon. "Are ye vexed with me?"

Rosaleen patted the vacant space beside her, so Shannon slid in next to her. Rosaleen drew Shannon close and brushed the hair from her sister's eyes. "Of course, I'm not mad at ye. What makes ye think that?"

"Ever since ye got married we hardly do anythin' together. Ye do not have time for me, and neither does Shawn. I miss ye, and I miss our time together."

"I am sorry. I do not mean to ignore ye. Bein' married takes up a lot of a person's time, especially since Blaise and I hardly know each other. I'll tell ye what, though. Blaise is goin' to be away for a few days. We'll take advantage of his absence and be together like old times, okay?"

"That sounds fun!" Then a frown passed across Shannon's sweet face. "We'll have so much to do when we get to the farm. There probably won't be time for anythin' fun."

Rosaleen pinched Shannon's nose playfully, then gave her shoulders a squeeze. "We can make anythin' fun if we try."

"Even marriage?" Shannon asked impishly.

Rosaleen laughed. "We can always pretend."

Rosaleen quickly turned Shannon's attention to the scenery. As far as the eye could see, beautiful landscapes greeted the newcomers. It didn't look like Ireland, though, and there would always be a special place in Roseleen's heart for her homeland.

Suddenly, she felt melancholy. Did she leave her beloved Eire only to find herself in a loveless marriage? Would the fairies curse her for loving a man who would never return her love? Would he

leave her? She had to find out for sure, and there was only one way. She must be a real wife to him. Somehow, she had to get up the nerve to tell him her new condition to their agreement.

* * * * *

When the O'Shays left Stockton, Blaise didn't waste any time before he loaded a packhorse with supplies and hurried to Jonas's hideout, an old shack abandoned by squatters years ago. Blaise and his friends had found the place as children, and he hadn't been there in over fifteen years.

On their way to Fort Sutter, Blaise shared with Jonas the little information he had uncovered about Lance Kincaid. "Mandy was right. The people around Stockton are afraid of Lance Kincaid. I couldn't get any information from anyone without appearing overly eager."

"Did you fin' anything 'bout your ma and pa, Mista Cameron?"

"Only that no one has seen them in almost two years," Blaise answered with a wince. "I found out what Kincaid has been doing with the cattle from the Buckshot Ranch."

"What's dat, Mista Cameron?"

"He's been shipping the cattle south to sell to the Johnny Rebs. Just think, Jonas, all the time we were eating rats, squirrels, and grubs, the Rebs were feasting on my family's cattle. I can still visualize our soldiers sick and dying for the lack of food."

Jonas gently spurred his horse, trying to keep up with Blaise. "But the war is over. What does he want the ranch now for?"

Blaise's laugh was cynical. "Why should Kincaid leave now? He's bought a town and has everyone around him scared to death of him and his henchmen. He would be crazy to leave it all after building up an empire here in the West."

Jonas rolled his eyes. "That's one greedy man for sure."

Blaise glanced at Jonas, his eyes squinting with revenge under the brim of his Stetson. "Let's just hope his luck has run out."

"How much further, Da?" Shannon stood behind the wagon seat. "It's been ages since we stopped for lunch, and I'm tired."

"'Twill be soon, I'm sure, alanna," her mother said.

"Will it take us this long every time we want to go to town?"

"Aye, I fear so, me darlin'," Maureen answered with a sympathetic smile. "Why do ye not sing another song? 'Twill pass the time faster."

Shannon's lower lip jutted out. "We've sung all the songs we know."

"May the saints preserve us!" Patrick said enthusiastically. "I think we're home."

Shawn must have come to the same conclusion, for he stopped in the middle of the road ahead of them. He and Janna jumped from the buckboard and ran toward to the second wagon.

"We're here, Da. We're home at last!" Shawn twirled Janna around by her waist. "We're home, *asthor*, now I can be a real husband to ye."

Janna blushed at Shawn's endearments. Laughing, she stood on her toes and kissed Shawn. "My home is where you are, my love."

Shawn held her close. "I love ye very much, Janna O'Shay."

Rosaleen watched Shawn and Janna embrace. In the past,

she'd felt a little envious of their love, but now she was only happy for them.

"Are ye sure this is the right farm, Patrick?" Maureen asked anxiously.

Patrick craned his neck, his eyes following the long driveway that led to a large, two-story house. "'Tis the same Blaise described, all right."

"But it's not at all like our cottage in Eire," Shannon said. "None of this is like Ireland."

"Nay, lassie, 'tis not, for this is America," her father explained with a gentle smile. "But cannot this be our own wee Ireland?"

"That's a good name for the farm, Da. In the Irish, 'little Ireland' is 'beg Bamba.' How would the Beg Bamba Ranch sound?"

"'Tis a good idea, Shannon lass, but 'tis for Rosaleen and Blaise to name the farm."

Rosaleen hugged her sister close. "I'm sure Blaise would agree to the name, Da."

Patrick smiled, his eyes glistening, and in that moment, Rosaleen knew she'd made the right decision to marry Blaise. All her sacrifices were worth her family's happiness. The Lord would work out the rest. She would keep her faith that He would guide her to happiness as well.

Before they started down the long driveway, the O'Shays looked across the vast fertile pastures. It wasn't Ireland, but it was good, rich farmland. How blessed they were! Patrick asked his family members to bow their heads, and he gave a prayer of thanks.

After the benediction, they drove the wagons down the drive. Rosaleen craned her neck to get a better look at the house. The paint was peeling and most of the shutters hung askew. Shingles from the roof littered the ground like fallen leaves in autumn, and

several windows were broken.

Once they climbed down from the wagons, Patrick stood between Maureen and Rosaleen, leaning on his cane. "The old girl is a bit run-down and needs a few repairs, but there's nothin' Shawn and I cannot do ourselves."

Maureen squeezed Patrick's hand. "Aye, love. We'll have the ol' girl shipshape in no time. Blaise won't even recognize her."

As they ascended the steps of the porch, they noticed several rotted planks and carefully skirted around them. Then they entered the foyer and Rosaleen gasped. Though covered in several layers of grime and dust, the interior of the home was beautiful.

A staircase led from the foyer to the upper level. A large parlor with a pretty stone fireplace lay to the right, and a dining room to the left featured a corner fireplace. A swinging door led from the dining room into a large kitchen. Across the hall from the kitchen Rosaleen saw another room, with a desk covered by a white sheet. A small fireplace and built-in shelves filled one wall.

When they inspected the upper level, they found three bedrooms and a small parlor with a fireplace.

"I cannot believe what I'm seein'," Rosaleen said as they descended the stairs. "Pinch me quick to see if I'm dreamin'."

"Yer not dreamin', lassie. 'Tis real enough." Maureen smiled. "'Tis a beautiful house under the dust. Much more than I expected."

Patrick pulled his wife close. "Me too, me darlin'." He headed for the front door with a wink at Shawn. "Come, me boy. Let's see about the place before we unload the wagons, eh?"

After the men left, the women went through the house again, inspecting every nook and cranny, commenting on the things they'd missed the first time.

"I've never lived in a house this fine before," Janna said.

Rosaleen giggled. "Neither have we."

Shannon grabbed her mother's hand. "Mama, which room is mine?"

"I do not know, alanna. Have ye any preference, Rosaleen Katherine, to which room ye'll be wantin'?"

"Nay, Mama."

Maureen paused as if in thought. "Maybe ye and Blaise should take the room downstairs. Blaise may feel better having a wee bit of privacy down here by yerselves."

Rosaleen blushed. "Aye, Mama, ye may be right." *At least he can come and go as he pleases without drawing any suspicion, she thought bitterly.*

"All right, then. Shannon, ye can have the smallest bedroom upstairs. Janna, ye choose which of the larger ones ye like best. 'Tis no difference to me which one Da and I have."

"Now, Rosaleen Katherine, what do ye want us to do first?"

Rosaleen caught her breath. "Mama, do not ask me. 'Tis yer home too. Do not be askin' me like ye were a servant. I may be married, but ye still know more about these thin's than I do. Please decide, Mama."

"As ye wish, lass." Maureen rolled up her sleeves and began giving orders. "Shannon, please go out and find some wood to build a fire. We must have lots of hot water for all the scrubbin'. Rosaleen and Janna, let's uncover all the furniture and see what's here. When the men return, we'll unload the wagons and see what kind of supplies Blaise bought."

Rosaleen sighed with relief as she followed Janna into the parlor and helped her uncover furniture. *It's nice to see Mama so happy, Lord. Thank Thee for makin' this all possible.*

Maureen removed the dirty curtains from the windows. Beams of sunlight filtered through the windows, dust swirling like tiny fairies in the shafts of light.

When they uncovered the furniture, they stirred up more dust, so Maureen made another sweep of the house, opening at least one window in every room. In no time at all, the cool breeze eliminated the dust in the air, along with the damp, musty odor.

Rosaleen and Janna piled the furniture covers on the floor in the foyer. Then Rosaleen wiped the dust from her face and went to the kitchen to speak to her mother. "Where should we put all of the furniture covers, Mama? We cannot clean properly with them stacked here in the house."

"Ye can put them outside with the curtains. Shannon can show you where. Tomorrow, we'll build a fire outdoors and wash everythin'."

"I do not think they're salvageable, Mama."

"Aye, Rosaleen Katherine, that is true. Some will have to be cut up and used for cleaning rags. Hopefully, some can be used for towels, napkins, and tablecloths." Removing the last of the oilcloth from the shelves of the kitchen cupboards, Maureen went on, "The curtains are too far gone. The hot sun rotted the fabric beyond use. As soon as possible, we'll make new curtains from the best of the furniture coverings. I can dye them if ye children will help me sew them into curtains."

Rosaleen hugged her mother tight. "Aye, Mama, we'll help. I want ye to think of this as yer home."

When the men returned from inspecting the grounds, they found the house in a flurry of orders and scurrying females. "What's the hurry, woman?" Patrick asked as he scampered aside for Rosaleen to pass with an armload of dirty cloths.

Maureen placed her palms on her hips. "We've been busy, and we need the cleanin' supplies from the wagons. Be a love and have Shawn bring them to me here in the kitchen."

Patrick lifted his hat and scratched his head. "Why the hurry,

Maureen? I wanted to tell ye what Shawn and me found outside before we got to work.”

Maureen held her hand up. “Nay, Patrick, I do not have time now. I will not bring anythin’ into this house until it’s clean. So, if ye want supper, ye best get me cleanin’ thin’s and have Shawn air all of the mattresses, or we’ll be sleepin’ on the floor this night.

Patrick jammed the hat back on his head. “I can see, woman, where Rosaleen Katherine gets her nature. Pray tell, can we at least see to the horses before ye commit us to woman’s work?”

Maureen placed the palms of her hands on Patrick’s cheeks and kissed him on the lips. “Aye, me husband, ye can tend the horses. Be patient with me, and I’ll let ye tell me yer news later, okay?”

Patrick’s eyes twinkled with mischievousness. “Ye mean I cannot tell ye about the wallpaper on the walls of the barn or about the polished hardwood floors . . .”

“Out!” Maureen pointed to the back door. “Now I know where Rosaleen Katherine gets her cheekiness!”

Patrick stole one more kiss. “I best skedaddle before ye take me over yer knee.”

Maureen laughed and swatted him on the backside as he hobbled out the back door.

After the men found the cleaning supplies and lay the mattresses out to air in the sun, Maureen finally conceded and let them share their news with the women.

Shannon brought a kitchen chair outside for her father. Patrick sat and rubbed his bad leg. “The barn and outbuildin’s are in good condition. ’Twill shelter a lot of livestock. The chicken coop ’tis in bad shape and there’s not an outhouse to be seen. Shawn and me can remedy that. We also found a lake not far from the house. ’Tis a beaut’, surrounded by trees. And ye’ll never guess what else we found. There’s a bath and wash house over

there!" He pointed to a small building close to the back of the house. "Just think, a wee house just for bathin' and washin' yer clothes. I never saw the likes."

"That's not all." Shawn stopped to rest briefly before stacking the rest of their belongings on the back porch. "We found enough farm implements to get us started. There are even a couple of old wagons in the barn. It would be easy to make one good wagon out of the parts between the two. Da and I want to get started on the fixin' right away. We cannot be rentin' a buckboard all the time."

"Are you sure Blaise would approve of all these things?" Janna asked.

"Aye, he told Da and I to do what we could on the place. He'll be here in about a week, and we'll discuss what he wants done with the fields. It'll take us that long to fix everythin' before startin' the crops."

So Blaise intends to be away for a week, Rosaleen mused. *He told me a few days*. Suddenly, she felt sad and miserable, but she pushed aside her own concerns. "Isn't it too late in the season to be startin' a crop?"

Patrick shook his head. "Blaise wants to plant the fields this year, so by next sprin' the crops will be ready to grow. First, we must cut the wild hay and oats for the stock we want to buy now. 'Twill be a lot cheaper than buyin' hay this winter."

"Won't the seeds freeze this winter?" Rosaleen asked.

Patrick smiled at his daughter's puzzled expression. "Nay, Rosaleen, they'll be safe. 'Tis winter hay we'll be plantin'. Ye'll see."

Maureen placed her hand on Rosaleen's shoulder. "We'll not worry about that now. 'Tis growin' late. We best get started on the house. I think I had better start in the kitchen so we can have hot meals."

"If ye do that, Mama, Shannon and I can do yer and Da's bedroom." Rosaleen turned to Janna. "Can ye manage alone for a bit?"

"Of course," Janna replied, smiling at Shawn.

"What about ye, Rosaleen Katherine? Ye need to prepare yer and Blaise's room also."

"I know, Mama. Shannon and I can bunk together for a few nights in her room. I'll have plenty of time before Blaise returns to get ours in order." Rosaleen winked at her little sister.

"'Tis settled, then."

While the women hunted through the crates, Shawn built a fire in the bathhouse. Using the hand pump in the back yard, he filled several large kettles with water and set them to heating. Patrick and Shawn left to tend to the horses.

The women spent all afternoon sweeping, mopping, scrubbing, dusting, and polishing. Then Janna, Rosaleen, and Shannon sneaked out and brought the mattresses back upstairs, searched until they found the sheets and blankets from Senora Buckley, and made their parents' bed.

Finally, the girls stood back and admired their handiwork. The room looked beautiful. All was done except unpacking Maureen's and Patrick's personal items, and Rosaleen knew her mother would want to do that herself.

All three girls raced down the stairs to the kitchen and escorted Maureen upstairs. As she slowly looked around the room, Maureen wiped away her tears with the corner of her apron. "Never have I had a more beautiful room. When I have me own thin's about me, then it will be perfect."

Maureen embraced each of the girls. Then she hugged her eldest daughter again. "Ye'll never know how happy ye have made yer da and me. 'Tis like a dream come true."

"'Tis no dream, Mama." Rosaleen smiled through misty eyes.

“Aye, yer right, and I must finish me own work in the kitchen if there’s to be dinner in this house tonight.”

Maureen started to leave but paused to look back at Rosaleen. ’Tis nice to be cookin’ in a kitchen again, though ye do not have to allow me the privilege of bein’ the woman of the house. I do not think I could love ye any more than I do. I’m findin’ me daughter is all grown up and is a compassionate woman. Thank ye for that, me darlin’.”

Rosaleen watched her mother leave and offered a silent prayer. *Thank Thee, Lord, for blessing me family so much.*

After dinner, Rosaleen helped Shannon and Janna finish their rooms. Every muscle in her body ached. She never realized how much work cleaning a large house could be, especially one that had been neglected for so many years.

Shannon was too tired to try out the bathhouse, so Maureen helped her wash her face and hands and sent her to bed after dinner. Rosaleen and Janna used the bathhouse last, after doing the dinner dishes while Maureen bathed.

As she and Janna soaked in the hot, steaming water, Rosaleen sighed with contentment.

“Rosaleen, are you awake?” Janna asked from her tub.

“Uh-huh.”

“I have a secret I want to share with you.”

“Mmm.”

“I think I may be pregnant.”

Rosaleen sat up straight. “Pregnant? Are ye sure? How can ye tell?”

Janna laughed and her cheeks went crimson. “Oh, you know, the usual ways.”

Rosaleen brushed the strands of wet hair from her face. “Have ye told Shawn yet?”

“No. I want to be sure first. He wants a baby so badly, and

I don't want to disappoint him. I'll know for sure by the first of next month."

"Oh, Janna, I'm happy for ye and Shawn. I hope yer suspicions are right."

"How about you, Rosaleen? Do you think you could be pregnant too?"

Rosaleen laughed heartily.

"What's so funny about that? You could be, you know."

"Nay, Janna, I hardly doubt it," Rosaleen managed, still laughing. "I'm afeared Blaise would have apoplexy if I even mentioned such an idea."

"Doesn't Blaise want children?"

"Let's just say he's not ready for that yet. But do not worry about me, Janna. It's ye that concerns me. Ye best be not overdoin' anythin' until ye find out for sure if yer goin' to have a wee bairn. I do not want to see ye carryin' anythin' or overexertin' yerself, or I'll tell Shawn. I mean it, too."

Janna smiled fondly at her sister-in-law. "I know you do, dear Rosaleen. I'd deserve it if I did anything to harm our baby."

"Ye could never do that intentionally. Yer too sweet and lovin', Janna."

"Thank you, Rosaleen. I do love you and your family. I could never go back to the way I was before—alone, scared, and unloved."

"Ye will not have to worry about that now. We're yer clan forever."

"Janna!" Shawn yelled from outside the bathhouse. "Are ye stayin' in there all night? I've been waitin' for ye so I can go to bed. Mama and Da are already retired. Come, me darlin', ye know I cannot sleep without ye."

Janna lowered her eyes as Rosaleen giggled and yelled to Shawn that they would be in soon. When they finished their

baths, Rosaleen went to bed too. For once, she was too tired to worry about Blaise and where he was.

NINETEEN



Rosaleen woke the next morning, happy to be in a real bed in her own home. Her thoughts turned to Blaise and she prayed for his safety. Whatever he had to do must be very important, and she must be patient and understanding.

Rosaleen rummaged through her belongings, found an old frock, and put it on. Then she quickly put her hair in a bun. What did it matter how she looked? She planned to clean house all day, and Blaise wouldn't be around.

The scrubbed and polished kitchen shone as the early morning rays beamed through the newly washed windowpanes. The lively chatter of the O'Shay clan and the warmth from the cook stove made the kitchen feel homey. If only Blaise were here and loved her as much as Shawn loved Janna, the day would be perfect. *I mustn't think of such things, Lord, since they can never be. I should be content with that which Thou hast given me.*

As soon as breakfast was over, the men filled the washtubs in the kitchen and the bathhouse. Patrick and Shawn started on the outside chores, while Rosaleen and Janna straightened the

kitchen and cleaned the parlor. Maureen and Shannon started the washing in the bathhouse. All that day and well into the next, the family worked hard, scrubbing and cleaning. By mid afternoon on the third day, the house was in order, and the menfolk had fixed everything they dared without speaking to Blaise.

Over the next few days, a number of neighbors came to welcome the O'Shays, bringing small tokens of friendship. Rosaleen was surprised the neighbors were so friendly even after discovering the O'Shays were Irish.

The neighbors were overjoyed to learn Blaise had returned safely from the war, and they congratulated Rosaleen on her marriage to him. However, when Rosaleen told them Blaise was gone but would return soon, several neighbors seemed worried.

Several farmers offered to sell Patrick enough stock to get them started, so one morning Shawn and his father hitched the team and left to purchase the animals.

With the housecleaning finished, the only thing left was sewing the new curtains. But Rosaleen was so anxious for Blaise to return that she couldn't face the dreariness of handiwork. Instead, she decided to try to return the lawn to its former beauty. So, while Janna and Maureen baked in the kitchen, Rosaleen and Shannon raked and hauled off weeds and debris. As soon as Blaise returned, they would start on a garden.

Suddenly, Shannon stopped singing and looked down the road leading to the farmhouse, and Rosaleen heard horse hoofs in the distance. She shielded her eyes against the glaring sun and peered toward the sound. A group of riders approached.

Fear stabbed through her heart as she saw the men's guns. Her father and Shawn hadn't returned from buying livestock and they were alone, four females, on a farm far from any neighbors or help. Rosaleen pushed Shannon toward the house. "Shannon, warn Mama. Run!"

Before the men had a chance to dismount, Rosaleen met them outside the gate, the rake still in her hand. "What can I do for ye?"

"Where's Cameron?"

"I beg yer pardon, sir." Rosaleen bristled at the man's tone.

"I heard Cameron was back. Where is he?"

Rosaleen spat out, "Just who do ye think ye are, askin' for the whereabouts of Blaise?"

The man cursed. "A Paddy! Just what we need. You had better go back to where you came from. You're not welcome here."

"What makes ye think ye can be tellin' me where I can live, ye diabhol?"

"If you squatters don't get off my land, you'll find out the hard way. Tell Blaise Cameron that Lance Kincaid gives him a week to move on, or I'll shoot him for trespassing."

"Ye cannot be forcin' a man from his own property, Mr. Kincaid. Blaise's parents own this farm and the Buckshot Ranch. When they return from Europe, ye'll be the one movin' on, not us."

"Europe? Who said the Camerons are in Europe?"

"They wrote Blaise while he was away at war."

"Is that so?" Kincaid grinned. "Then why hasn't Blaise returned to the Buckshot Ranch?"

"He does not want the Buckshot Ranch. Blaise has plans of his own with this ranch. We do not want charity from his parents, not after the way they treated him."

"Who are you? How do you know so much about the Camerons?"

Rosaleen held her head high. "I'm Mrs. Cameron, Blaise's wife."

"I don't believe it," Kincaid said cruelly. "Cameron married Irish trash." Then his dark eyes narrowed. "All the same, tell

Cameron I'll be watching him. If I find him nosing around the Buckshot Ranch, I'll have him shot on sight."

"Be gone with ye, diabhol. Yer such a brave man to be threatenin' me while the menfolk are away. Just leave before I lose me patience."

One of the hands glared at Rosaleen. "Are you going to take that, el heffy? Orders from a filthy Paddy?"

"Ye best be doin' as me daughter says, mister," Maureen O'Shay warned from the door of the house. "I may not be able to shoot all of ye, but yer boss will be the first one to go down."

"Me mother means it, Mr. Kincaid. She's shot worse animals than ye in Ireland."

"We'll leave this time, Mrs. Cameron, but you best be watching over your shoulder from now on. You're a spirited thing, and I like spunky women. Tell that to Cameron." With another pelt of evil laughter, Kincaid motioned his men to leave.

"Ochagon!" Maureen put the rifle down, her hands still shaking. "What have we done, Rosaleen? To make enemies with the likes of that man could be serious."

As Kincaid and his men left the farm, Rosaleen felt a calmness seep through her soul. But her mother looked pale and frightened. "Do not fret, Mama," she comforted. "I'm sure he is not a friend of Blaise's."

"Of course he is not. He cannot be a friend of Blaise's with the way he was talkin'. Ye best be leery of the likes of him, me daughter. He's no good."

Rosaleen leaned the rake against the fence. "I'm not frightened of him, Mama. If I can handle the likes of Ward Masters I can handle a cowpoke."

"I agree with your mother, Rosaleen." Janna now stood on the porch as well. "This man Kincaid is serious, and he seems to be looking for any kind of excuse to kill Blaise. I know I'll feel

safer when Shawn gets home. That man gives me the creeps”

“Now do not be gettin’ yerself in a dither, ye two. Kincaid is just a bully. Blaise’s parents are the owners of this land, aren’t they?”

Maureen and Janna nodded in agreement.

“Well,” Rosaleen said, “Kincaid probably thought Blaise came back to take over the ranch until his parents return from Europe.”

“I hope yer right, lassie,” Maureen said as she looked down the long drive that led to the dusty road. “It looks as if someone has mistaken this for another farm.”

They looked in the direction Maureen indicated and saw a man herding a flock of sheep down the driveway.

“’Tis no mistake, Mama!” Shannon ran toward the road. “There’s Da in the wagon!”

The women ran to meet the men at the corral. Rosaleen quickly opened the gate before the sheep could scatter.

With the sheep safely in the pen, Patrick said excitedly, “Ye will not believe how we came by such a valuable flock, mavourneen. We went to the Wilsons’ and the Duncans’ to buy as much livestock we could. On our way home, we came across two men with a flock of sheep. We only wanted to buy a couple ewes and a ram to get started. We never thought they’d sell all of them. They offered them so cheap we couldn’t refuse. Why, they almost gave them to us.”

“Why, Patrick?” Maureen asked. “Why would they be wantin’ to sell such a fine flock and with good wool, too?”

“They decided farmin’ wasn’t for them so they’re goin’ back east. We have the luck of the Irish, me darlin’.”

“Not all of this flock is ours,” Patrick continued. “Half is to be a dowry for Rosaleen. Our half will multiply, and by the time Shawn and Janna have a place of their own, we’ll share with

them. That is if ye agree, me darlin' wife."

Maureen sighed. "The saints are indeed smilin' down on us.

Patrick and Shawn had also purchased two dozen plump laying hens, a pair of turkeys, and two geese. There were also two wiener pigs and a nanny goat in the back of the wagon.

"I'm sorry, me darlin'." Patrick placed his arm around Maureen's waist. "We did not buy a milk cow. The goat's milk will have to be good enough until we can find a milk cow for sale."

"'Tis fine, Patrick. 'Tis more than I prayed for. I'm more than happy."

The girls helped Shawn unload the livestock from the wagon. Maureen watched as her children and Janna tried to calm the flighty animals. Normally, she would have laughed at the antics.

"Patrick, I have some bad news for ye."

He turned from watching the children. "What did ye say, love?"

"We had visitors while ye and Shawn were away—visitors I had to chase off with the rifle."

Patrick's smile faded, and Maureen relayed the story to him. "This Lance Kincaid has it out for Blaise, that was plain to see. I'm worried, Patrick." Her voice cracked. "All was goin' so well and now this."

Patrick took Maureen in his arms. "Now, now, there, love. 'Twill be fine just as soon as Blaise returns home. But I do not like hearin' this Kincaid man scared me womenfolk. I think Shawn and me should pay him a visit."

Maureen jerked away from Patrick. "Nay, ye mustn't! He is an evil man. Promise me ye will not do anythin' of the sort. Wait for Blaise to return. Promise me, Patrick!"

"Shh, shh. I will not go see him if it worries ye so much. I'll wait until Blaise returns."

“Everythin’ was goin’ so well. I pray our good luck doesn’t turn.”

Hand in hand, they walked toward the house. “I am a bit worried about Blaise and Rosaleen.” Maureen shook her head. “I feel somethin’ isn’t right with them. I don’t understand why he is away so long after they just wed. I pray we did the right thin’ lettin’ him marry our daughter.”

“Do not fret so. Blaise is a good lad. We have to trust in him and in the Lord.”

Maureen smiled. “Aye, I just need to keep me faith. But a wee talk with Blaise when he decides to come home wouldn’t be amiss.”

“Yer woman’s intuition may be right.”

Everyone was in high spirits that evening. To celebrate the new flock and farm animals, Shawn went hunting and came back with two jackrabbits. Mrs. O’Shay fried them and then baked them in the oven for several hours in thick gravy. There were thick, flaky biscuits with farm-fresh butter, and crisp vegetables, generously supplied by a neighbor. Best of all was the fresh, cool goat’s milk, the first the O’Shays had tasted since leaving Ireland.

With so much fresh goat’s milk available, Maureen decided to make goat cheese. The next morning she set the milk on the stove to clabber. Rosaleen knew she should stay and help her mother and Janna make the cheese, but there were more interesting things to do outside. Besides, if she stayed in the house all day, she’d get another lecture from her parents concerning Lance Kincaid.

Ever since her father heard about the distressing scene with the foreman of the Buckshot Ranch, he was on edge waiting for

Blaise to return. Rosaleen, on the other hand, believed Kincaid was just showing off by trying to scare some helpless females. She had more important things to worry about than an intrusive neighbor. She needed to go off and think.

Surely, her parents wouldn't object if she and Shannon went fishing at the lake. It wasn't far from the ranch, so nothing could happen to them there.

It took some coaxing before Maureen finally relented and allowed Shannon to go. Rosaleen pointed out that with the men busy cutting the wild hay for winter feed, they had no time for hunting. She reasoned with her mother, explaining that it was too warm to kill a large animal without it spoiling in the heat. Until then, fish would do for dinner.

Shannon was overjoyed with the prospect of avoiding work for an entire day. While she went in search for the materials they needed to make fishing poles, Rosaleen prepared lunch for them.

On the way to the pond, they laughed, sang, and ran through the golden fields of tall wild wheat. It felt good to be free of any burdens for a little while and to be as carefree as a child.

"'Tis a deliciously beautiful day, eh?" Rosaleen said happily.

"Aye, it 'tis," Shannon answered. "'Tis a hot day to be enjoyed by a loch."

"In that case" —Rosaleen picked up her skirts— "I'll race ye to the water."

When they made it to the lake, Rosaleen was laughing and breathless. She dropped to her knees, gasping for air.

The lake was beautiful. Large trees shaded the banks. The breeze was fresh and cool as it blew across the rippling waves.

When Rosaleen and Shannon saw the sandy beach, they peeled off their shoes and stockings and raced to the water's

edge. They dipped their toes in the refreshing cool water and gasped with delight.

“Look, Rosaleen.” Clearly awestruck, Shannon pointed. “A *rath*.”

There in the midst of a small thicket was a mound of earth. Rosaleen knew what a rath was, and this indeed looked to be a home for fairies. “Shannon, ye might be right.”

Shannon ran to the small knoll of dirt to inspect the fairies’ hideaway. After Rosaleen constructed the fishing poles, she looked around for Shannon and found her still at the rath.

“The poles are ready, Shannon. We best be catchin’ some bait if we want to fish.”

“I can’t, Rosaleen,” Shannon replied breathlessly. “I’m fixin’ the fairies’ home. They’ll be so surprised when they return and see what I’ve done.”

“If we don’t catch enough fish for dinner, Mama may not let ye come with me anymore,” Rosaleen said as she looked among the rocks along the shore for periwinkles.

“Oh, all right. After we catch enough fish for dinner, I want to finish the rath.”

Rosaleen smiled. “That’s fine. I’m sure the fairies appreciate yer efforts.”

All morning Rosaleen and Shannon fished on a grassy knoll near the lakeshore. As they chatted during lunch, it felt like old times to Rosaleen. She couldn’t help but laugh when Shannon returned to the rath to leave tidbits of food for the wee fairies. Rosaleen didn’t realize how much she’d missed spending time with her little sister.

By afternoon, they had caught enough fish for dinner, so Shannon went back to the rath, while Rosaleen sat dangling her feet in the water.

The day grew even hotter, making the cool water even more

inviting. When Rosaleen could fight the temptation no longer, she jumped up and began to disrobe.

“Rosaleen Katherine!” Shannon shrieked. “What are ye doin’?”

“I’m goin’ swimmin’.”

“Ye cannot go swimmin’ without a bathin’ costume or somethin’ on,” Shannon said. “Someone might come by and see ye. There are a lot of cowboys and such around here.”

Rosaleen leaned her head back and laughed. “This loch is on our property. No one will be ridin’ by.”

With that, Rosaleen flung the last of her clothing to the ground and plunged into the cool water. When she came up for air, she brushed the soggy hair from her face and noticed she had swum quite a distance from shore.

Reveling in the cool water, she floated on her back and then dog paddled back and forth. “Come join me, Shannon. This is so refreshin’ on such a hot day.”

“Swim naked?” Shannon sounded shocked. “I’m not doin’ that, and ye best be comin’ out before I go and tell Mama and Da.”

“Go right ahead, ye little tattletale.” Rosaleen laughed. “I’m a married woman now. Besides, Da and Shawn couldn’t come down here with me naked, could they?”

“Just the same, I am goin’ to tell. Even Blaise wouldn’t like ye swimmin’ that way.”

“Bah! He will not care. He isn’t even here to find out.”

“Blaise will come home and when he does, yer in trouble, Rosaleen Katherine,” Shannon yelled as she started for home on a dead run.

Giggling at her sister’s straitlaced attitude, Rosaleen continued to enjoy her swim. She would live her life the way she wished. No rogue husband would dictate to her, especially one who did

not intend to stay around. She'd show Blaise Cameron and her parents she was no longer a child.

* * * * *

Blaise rode toward the ranch. It had been a hectic week, and now he had to face Roseleen and the O'Shays. Worry lines creased his brow. How would he answer the questions he knew were coming? *Help me, Lord*, he prayed.

Before attempting to cover his tracks with more dishonesty, he needed to rest. The thought of lying to the O'Shays again turned his stomach.

Jonas and Ross were doing their part to help find out where Kincaid had hidden Blaise's parents. *Please, God, let them still be alive. I pray Patsy is still on the ranch and can help Jonas.*

As Blaise approached the homestead, something wasn't right. He shook his head, rubbed his eyes, and looked again. The vision was still there. Could it be possible he was having a nightmare while wide awake?

He heard the distinctive bleat of sheep—many sheep. It was no dream. Where in tarnation did the O'Shays get sheep? This was cattle country! Didn't they know what the neighboring ranchers would do when they found out sheep were ruining good grazing land? All Blaise needed was to fight a range war on top on everything else.

He rode straight to the sheep in the corral. A wagonload of wild hay sat next to the open barn doors. They must have been cutting the hay all day, Blaise realized guiltily as Shawn and Patrick waved at him. *I should be helping them.*

"Holy Saint Patrick's in the morn. Yer safe!" Patrick nodded to him in greeting. "We were all gettin' a wee bit

worried about ye, laddie.”

“I see ye’ve noticed our flock of sheep,” Shawn broke in before Blaise had a chance to respond to Patrick.

“Aye, the luck of the Irish we be havin’ to find such a herd,” Patrick said.

Blaise tried to hold his voice steady. “Where did you get them?”

“I’d be happy to explain, laddie, if ye come down from yer horse. I’m gettin’ a crick in me neck just lookin’ up at ye.”

Blaise dismounted and listened to Patrick’s explanation. When he heard how the O’Shay men had gotten the sheep, Blaise shook his head in defeat. How could he allow sheep in the valley?

“What ’tis the matter, laddie? Ye do not seem pleased with yer dowry.” Patrick’s voice was laced with concern.

“My dowry?”

“Aye, laddie. In Ireland, a lassie must have a dowry to wed. ’Twould not be honorable otherwise. Half of the herd belongs to ye and Rosaleen Katherine. We also fixed the place up a bit while ye were away and started to bring in the wild hay. There’s much to do now that yer home.”

Shawn placed his hand on Patrick’s shoulder. “Before ye go into all of that, Da, we best be tellin’ Blaise what happened while he was away.”

“Aye, yer right. Lance Kincaid is more of a problem than sheep and wild hay.”

“Lance Kincaid?” Blaise’s heart pounded in his chest. “Where did you hear about him?”

“He came to Beg Bamba while ye were away,” Patrick said. “I do not think he likes ye, laddie.”

Blaise drew his fingers through his hair, mumbling, “I guess it was to be expected.”

“What is it, laddie?” Patrick asked. “What is goin’ on? Does this

Kincaid have anythin' to do with ye?"

Blaise motioned to the barn. "Come inside and I'll try to answer your questions."

Once in the barn, Blaise indicated a stack of hay, and Patrick and Shawn sat down. Then Blaise sat across from them.

"I don't know where to begin to explain to you what's going on. I hoped I wouldn't have to involve you or your family.

"First, I must have your word that what I tell you will not go any further than the three of us. The more people who know about this, the more people will be in danger."

"Ye have our word, laddie," Patrick said.

Shawn nodded. "Ye can trust us."

"I'm taking a big gamble on that, Shawn. I only hope you two will understand why I've had to deceive you."

Blaise saw father and son exchange puzzled looks. He took a big gulp, fighting the gnaw in his gut. "I married your daughter under false pretences, Patrick. I'm not proud of it, but at the time I thought it would answer a few of my problems and help your family at the same time."

Blaise felt a heavy load lifted from his shoulders, and he exhaled a sigh of relief. "But the plan backfired. I thought I could use Rosaleen, and, after I was through, I would get our marriage annulled. The farm was to go to Rosaleen for her troubles, but I find myself in love with her. I don't know if there's a chance for us now or not. I have to get the problem of mine solved before I dare court Rosaleen properly.

"I hope my telling you all of this won't change our relationship, but I'll understand if it does. Rosaleen is your daughter, and she must be considered first."

Patrick blinked his eyes and then closed them, pressing his fingertips to his temples. When he opened his eyes again, he asked, "Did Rosaleen Katherine know of the stipulation for yer

marriage?"

"Yes, sir, she did. She only agreed so that you could have the farm you've all dreamed of having. Rosaleen's not at fault, sir."

Patrick laughed. "'Tis nice of ye to plead me daughter's case, laddie. If she knew all of this, then she has no right to complain, and neither do I. I knew ye two did not love each other when ye wed, but her Mama and I had hopes ye would grow to love each other."

"I don't know about Rosaleen. She's pretty stubborn," Blaise said matter-of-factly. "I don't think her pride would even let her admit she loves me."

"Providence brought ye and me daughter together, Blaise. Do not lose faith. And do not let her buffalo ye. Be the man she needs ye to be."

"Do not worry about Rosaleen now, Blaise," Shawn added. "What is yer problem? Maybe we can help."

With the kinship he felt towards them, it took very little coaxing for Blaise to open up to Shawn and Patrick. The story of his parents' plight and Lance Kincaid's evil actions spilled from his troubled heart.

"Lance Kincaid knows I'm the only person who stands between him and the law. Other than my parents, I alone have the authority to sign the bank drafts or perform any of the legal functions concerning the ranch."

Patrick shook his head in astonishment. "Do ye have any help to back ye up, laddie, other than us?"

"The U.S. Calvary has offered assistance. They'll help with the arrest, but I have to find out where my parents are being held captive."

"'Tis all quite simple to me, laddie."

Blaise looked at Patrick in confusion. "What are you scheming?"

“’Twould seem to me that yer best plan would be to die.”

“That’s great!” Blaise snickered. “Simple, yet effective.”

“’Twill work, laddie,” Patrick replied with a hearty pelt of laughter. “Trust me.”

TWENTY



She's doin' what?" Maureen cried.

"Rosaleen Katherine is skinny-dippin'." Shannon tried to catch her breath after the long run from the lake. "I told her not to, but she does not listen to me."

"That foolish lass! Does she not know that she could be in danger? Merciful heavens, I must tell yer da."

Maureen raced from the house in a whirl of panic, passing a confused Janna in the yard.

Janna tried to catch up with her mother-in-law. "Mother, what's the matter?"

Maureen's mumbled words were lost in the wind. Her pace didn't falter until she came to the barn. When she saw Blaise, she released a sigh of relief.

"May the Saints preserve us!" Maureen exclaimed as she ran toward Blaise. "I'm ever so happy to see ye, Blaise. Yer home just in time. 'Tis Rosaleen Katherine."

Blaise's blood ran cold when he saw the frightened look on Maureen's face. "What is it? Is Rosaleen hurt?"

“Nay, but she is in danger. She is up to one of her shenanigans.”

Evidently, his dear wife hadn’t changed while he was away. “What’s she done this time?” Blaise asked.

“Shannon just informed me that Rosaleen Katherine is swimmin’ indecently at the loch.”

Indecently? Loch? What was she talking about? Then it dawned on him, and Blaise felt his face grow warm with embarrassment.

Maureen grabbed Blaise by the hand and shook it. “Blaise, did ye hear me? If those dreadful men, Lance Kincaid and his henchmen, find her out there alone, there is no tellin’ what they may do.”

Blaise realized the truth of Maureen’s words and glanced at Patrick.

“’Tis yer wife, lad. Just remember what I said about Rosaleen not gettin’ the best of ye.”

Blaise nodded and quickly strode toward the lake.

Maureen shook her head. “I wouldn’t want to be in me daughter’s place right now.”

“Blaise ’tis just the man Rosaleen needs, I be thinkin’,” Patrick said with a chuckle. “’Tis time she was tamed.”

“Yer right, but she’s not goin’ to like it.”

Rosaleen floated on her back in the cool water. The peace and tranquility of a quiet swim was just the tonic she needed.

She hadn’t heard from Blaise since they’d parted in Stockton. Why did he need a wife when he was never around? And how could she think she was in love with such a rogue? Still, it saddened her to think that their marriage would have to be annulled. How she

wished she could take him in her arms, whisper sweet endearments to him, and confirm her love for him.

“Rosaleen Katherine!”

Surprised, she dove under the water but came sputtering back to the surface several seconds later. She pushed the hair from her face and hiccupped, spitting lake water down her chin.

“Rosaleen Katherine Cameron, get out of the water now!”

Rosaleen’s heart pounded with fright. She crossed her arms over her chest as her eyes scanned the shoreline.

Blaise! She didn’t know if she felt relief or fear, and she chastised herself for her foolish act. When Blaise came closer, almost crushing Shannon’s rath, Rosaleen gulped at the ominous expression on his handsome face.

“I said get out of the water now, Rosaleen Katherine!”

Rosaleen drew what little courage she had and held her chin high in defiance. “And who are ye to be tellin’ me what to do, Blaise Cameron?”

“Your husband, that’s who. Now are you going to come out of there, or am I going to have to come in after you?”

Rosaleen watched him move closer. From her position, he looked at least ten feet tall. She shivered inwardly. Blaise took another step. She paddled backward as fast as she could. “’Tis goin’ to take more than a husband in name only to be tellin’ me what to do.”

When a wry smile spread across Blaise’s face, Rosaleen regretted her impulsive words. “Oh, I think I went too far this time,” she muttered to herself, her teeth chattering.

“I can manage that also, if you’d like, Mrs. Cameron. Now are you getting out, or am I coming in?”

The wind skimmed across the water, creating small ripples on the surface. Rosaleen opened her mouth, but before she had a chance to answer, water poured down her throat. She coughed,

spitting out lake water like a beached whale. When her eyes came into focus, she hoped to see Blaise looking at her with concern. Instead, she saw a wicked gleam in his eyes.

“What do ye think?” she finally replied.

“As you wish, dear wife. Just remember, you asked for it.”

She had hoped he wouldn’t call her bluff, but Blaise began to undress. With a small anguished cry, she shouted for him to stop. “All right, I’ll come out, but ye must turn yer back until I’m dressed.”

“Then you’d better hurry, Rosaleen Katherine. I’m not a patient man.”

Rosaleen’s arms and legs were stiff and cold but she managed to swim to the shore and dress as quickly as possible. Once she was fully clothed, she squared her shoulders and stomped off toward the farmhouse. Blaise followed her, but she dare not look at him for fear of a rebuttal.

When she came in view of the house, Rosaleen saw her family gathered together, obviously waiting for their return. With her head held high, she approached them.

“Rosaleen Katherine, ye ought to be ashamed of yerself, scarin’ us like that,” Maureen said. “Ye must never go swimmin’ like that again.”

“Don’t worry, Maureen, she won’t,” Blaise interrupted before Rosaleen could answer.

“I will if I want to,” Rosaleen said, her cheeks burning. She felt humiliated, and she didn’t care if her family knew she wasn’t the blushing bride. After all, even newlyweds had their problems.

“If you defy me, Rosaleen Katherine, you’ll live to regret it.”

Rosaleen’s face grew hot. She had to admit he was handsome, and something about him caused her heart to thump wildly in her breast. His frame had filled out since she’d seen him last time.

No doubt from Senora Buckley's cooking, Rosaleen thought with envy. Each time she gazed into his face, she felt lost. Surely, one of Shannon's fairies had put the come-hither on her.

"Do not threaten if ye cannot go through with it," Rosaleen said brusquely.

"Oh, I'll follow through with it. Don't worry your pretty little head about that."

"Ye wouldn't dare lay a hand on me with me Da and brother here."

"Try me."

At Blaise's infuriating grin and the hint of laughter in his voice, Rosaleen grew angrier and angrier. Without thinking, she drew her hand back and landed a smarting blow to Blaise's left cheek.

Blaise grabbed her by the arm. "I warned you to never strike me if you didn't want the same treatment."

Before she knew what was happening, he pulled her over to the woodpile and grabbed a choice piece of kindling. Then he gave the shocked onlookers a broad grin. "This ought to do the trick."

Rosaleen guessed what was on his mind and tried to free herself from his grip. "You wouldn't dare strike me!"

Ignoring her angry outburst, Blaise sat himself down on the chopping block and flung Rosaleen across his knee. Lodging her kicking feet between his legs, he landed a loud smack across her backside. An angry cry escaped her, and Blaise asked, "Are you going to do as I say, Rosaleen Katherine?"

"Ye can go to the diabol!" she shouted.

Blaise landed another smack on her backside. "You better give in, darling."

"Mama, Da," Rosaleen screamed, "stop this madman before he kills me!"

“Yer a married woman now, Rosaleen Katherine,” Patrick said with a chuckle.

“Stop, ye cur. I warn ye, I’ll take a cast iron skillet to yer head this night.”

“I’m sorry, sweetheart. This truly hurts me more than it does you.” He smacked her again.

Stubborn but not stupid, Rosaleen finally relented after the fourth strike, promising to abide by her husband’s wishes. Blaise released her without warning and she landed on the ground. She quickly jumped up and rubbed her sore derriere. With a glare at Blaise, she turned to leave before she did something foolish, like murder him in cold blood.

“Wait a minute, darling,” Blaise said sweetly. “It’s customary to kiss and make up.”

Rosaleen’s mouth flew open to protest but she saw the challenging look on Blaise’s face and decided to plot her revenge later. Stiffly she walked up to him and brushed her lips lightly across his cheek, then turned again to leave.

“Not that way, darling. I’m not your dotting old uncle. Try again, on the lips this time.”

Rosaleen kissed him again, her lips barely grazing his.

Blaise grabbed Rosaleen and kissed her as she dreamed so many times he would do. When he finally released her, Rosaleen drew back and placed her palms against her fevered cheeks. With a gasp, she fled to the house.

After sulking in her room for an hour, Rosaleen decided it was best to swallow her embarrassment and help her mother and Janna prepare dinner. She entered the kitchen and glanced around, expecting to see Blaise.

“Do not worry, dear, the coast is clear,” her mother said with a sympathetic smile. “The menfolk are outside cookin’ a lamb for dinner.”

Rosaleen grabbed a carrot from a basket on the counter. "What about the fish Shannon and I caught? I thought we were to have them for dinner."

"With Blaise's homecomin' and all, Da wanted somethin' special tonight."

"Prepare a feast, for the prodigal son has returned. Is that it?" Rosaleen knew sarcasm dripped from her every word.

She looked out the kitchen window and saw the men sitting around the makeshift barbecue pit in deep conversation. Shannon and Janna happily tended to the meat cooking in the pit. The juices dropped on the hot coals and sent a delicious aroma through the air.

"That is not a Christian attitude, Rosaleen Katherine," Maureen said. "Blaise is yer husband and part of this clan. Ye should be happy he has returned."

"Aye, I am happy, Mama—happy to have me husband back to beat me," Rosaleen answered hotly. "How foolish of me not to be more pleased." She sighed heavily. "I do not see Blaise for weeks, and do I get a lovin' reunion? Nay."

Maureen shook her finger at her daughter. "Now lass, do not exaggerate. What kind of a man would he be if he let ye get away with yer shenanigans?"

"I'm not a child, Mama. Blaise does not have to hit me with a stick!"

"Were ye not actin' like a child, and did ye not strike him first?"

Rosaleen looked into her mother's sweet face and couldn't help but return her smile. "Aye, Mama, I suppose I was actin' a little childish, and I suppose I shouldn't have hit him, either."

"That's a good lass. Remember, it takes two people to have a good marriage. Me mother, rest her soul, used to tell me a tree must bend both ways or 'twill break. She was right. Ye must work

hard if ye want to keep yer man.

“Yer Da was like Blaise when we were first married. He wanted his word to be law.” She chuckled. “I found I got more with honey than with vinegar. Remember that, lassie.” With a wink, Maureen slipped out the back door.

Rosaleen knew her mother’s advice was sound. “More with honey than with vinegar, eh? We’ll see about that.”

After supper, everyone retired to the parlor to enjoy the cool breeze that stirred the hot summer air. How peaceful and content Rosaleen felt with the soft murmur of voices around her. Though still upset at Blaise, she was glad he was safe at home.

Blaise seemed different since his return—more cordial and almost loving toward her. At first, Rosaleen thought he was simply keeping up the pretense of wedded bliss, but something in his eyes and the tone of his voice told her otherwise. She wondered if it was only wishful thinking on her part. She loved him, and that realization frightened her; after all, their marriage was meant to last only long enough to get them both what they wanted.

Everyone said their good nights and retired for bed. Blaise escorted Rosaleen to the bedroom she had occupied alone since her family had arrived at the homestead. As soon as the door closed behind them, Rosaleen felt butterflies in her stomach. She wondered—no, hoped—Blaise would finally insist on consummating their marriage.

Instead, he walked over to the closet and removed a jacket.

Rosaleen watched as he put it on. “Are ye leavin’?”

Several seconds passed before Blaise answered. “I’m sorry, Rosaleen, but I have to. I can’t explain it now, but soon, I promise. Please be patient with me.”

He reached over and kissed her lightly on the lips, then he climbed out the window into the darkness.

Rosaleen couldn’t believe it. *Blaise is gone almost two*

weeks, and the first night home, he slips out the window with no explanation! How could I have been foolish enough to think he cared for me? Rosaleen decided he was probably secretly meeting a woman, while she sat at home hoping they could work things out and have a real marriage. She was an *amadan*, a fool.

Every night for the next week, Blaise crawled out the window as soon as they retired to their room. The long, lonely nights grew harder and harder for Rosaleen to bear. Not having Blaise in her life at all would be better than this. A stolen glance or a knowing smile from Blaise was all the attention she received.

Another day of pent-up frustrations passed, and although Blaise finally stayed at home most of the day, something clearly worried him. All day, he looked over his shoulder or out into the distance, a troubled expression on his face. Even her father and Shawn seemed preoccupied and edgy. When evening came, Rosaleen welcomed the opportunity to head to bed.

After her evening prayer, Rosaleen crawled between the cool sheets, relishing the breeze that flowed through the open window. Just as she was about to drop off to sleep, Blaise entered the dark room. Rousing herself, Rosaleen sighed. "Another midnight ride? 'Tis a good thin' our room is on the main floor. 'Twould make an old man of ye to be climbin' down a trellis every night."

"I'm not going out tonight, at least not for a while."

A thud echoed in the quiet room as Blaise dropped his boots on the floor.

"No rendezvous, tonight? What happened? Your lady friend cannot come out and play?"

"Sarcasm doesn't become you, Rosaleen Katherine." Blaise started to undress. "Can't we at least pretend to like each other, just for tonight?"

The moon's rays lit Blaise's silhouette, and Rosaleen watched as he removed his checkered shirt and threw it over the back of

the chair. She sat up halfway to fluff her pillows. "Pretend. That's all we've been doin' since we met! I'm tired of pretendin'. I want what Janna has—a husband who loves me."

Rosaleen regretted the desperate words as soon as they left her mouth, but she couldn't stop herself from continuing. "I mean, is it too much to ask for? I—I know we married for other reasons, but . . ."

She bit her lip to keep from crying. What was the matter with her? She was practically begging Blaise to love her.

Blaise sat on the edge of the bed next to her. "No, it's not too much to ask for, Rosaleen."

He gently stroked her cheek, his fingertips trailing along her jawline. "Oh, my little dark rose with many thorns. How you prick my heart." Bending down, Blaise kissed Rosaleen's waiting lips.

* * * * *

The next morning, Rosaleen awoke feeling exhilarated. Blaise had been gentle and loving—a side of him Rosaleen hadn't seen. How confident she felt in her love for him now. Surely, he loved her as much as she loved him. It was time to declare her love.

Rosaleen reached over and placed her hand on the pillow next to her. Blaise was gone. He had promised to stay until she fell asleep, and he had kept his promise. But Rosaleen knew she would see him later in the day. Maybe they could even steal away for a few precious moments.

She ran down the stairs, taking two steps at a time, still singing when she entered the kitchen. She kissed her mother and then her father before sitting down at the table. "Good mornin', everyone."

Maureen placed a platter of hotcakes on the table. "My, aren't

we in a good mood this morn, Rosaleen Katherine.”

“Aye, Mama, I am. We have so much to be thankful for.”

Rosaleen stabbed two hotcakes with her fork and plopped them onto her plate. “Has the food been blessed?”

Shannon took a hotcake and passed the platter to Janna. “Aye. Yer late. Ye can do the dishes since ye missed out on helpin’ with breakfast.”

Rosaleen shrugged her shoulders, taking a bite of hotcake dripping with melted butter and warm, homemade maple syrup. “Da, why aren’t ye and Shawn out mendin’ fences or somethin’? Blaise left early this mornin’.”

Patrick glanced at Shawn, who cleared his throat. “Blaise may be in a hurry to mend fences so early in the morn, but Da and I aren’t. Besides, there’s a lot to do around here today.”

“One of ye should have gone out with him anyway. The work goes much faster if there is someone with ye.”

“I do not like the fences here in America,” Shannon complained. “Why don’t we have rock walls like the ones in Ireland? They are prettier than the barbed wire ye been stringin’.”

Patrick leaned back in his chair. “Aye, yer right there, lassie. Ye see, in Ireland there’s more rocks than we need, and they get in the way of plantin’, so we use them for fences. In America, the land is rich with fewer rocks. Barbed wire is more practical.”

“It’s also more dangerous,” Rosaleen said. “Maybe ye or Shawn should go help Blaise. He could get hurt out there and we wouldn’t even know it. Kincaid or some of his men might find him out there alone. You know how they feel about fencin’ off the range.”

“Maybe yer right, Rosaleen lass,” Patrick replied. “I’ll go help Blaise after breakfast. Ye best be stayin’ here. The womenfolk need yer help with the wash water. We do not want

Janna to overdo in her delicate condition.” He smiled fondly at his daughter-in-law.

When hoof beats sounded on the road, Patrick and Shawn grabbed their guns and headed for the front of the house. Patrick jerked the door open, brandishing his shotgun. Rosaleen was relieved to see the horsemen were their neighbors, not Lance Kincaid and his men.

“Welcome, comrades,” Patrick greeted, leaning his weapon against the wall. “What brings ye out so early in the morn? “

Mr. Thompson beckoned Patrick and Shawn to join them. “We need to talk.”

The women watched from the door as the men engaged in a muffled discussion. Suddenly, the men in the group turned and looked at Rosaleen, and the look on her father’s face made her heart stop. *Something has happened to Blaise!*

Rosaleen drew her hand to her throat. *Please, merciful Father in heaven, not Blaise!* She broke free from her mother’s hold and ran toward her father. “What’s wrong, Da? Is it Blaise? Has something happened to me husband? Please answer me.”

Patrick held his arms out for his daughter and held her close. Gently, he said, “I’m sorry, lassie. There’s been a fatal accident.”

TWENTY-ONE



Rosaleen couldn't think. She wanted to question, but somehow the words wouldn't come. Her body went cold, so cold. Then Patrick said the dreaded words. Blaise was dead. Rosaleen wrenched free from her father. "No, it isn't true!" She fell to her knees, screaming and screaming.

Tears poured down her cheeks as she looked up into the heavens. "No, Father, please do not take Blaise from me! I cannot bear losin' me husband!" she choked out, gasping for air. "Ye are a merciful God, and I beg Thee to take pity on me."

Rosaleen's family gathered around her, trying in vain to comfort her. Finally, Shawn ran to the house and returned with his father's flask filled with homemade whiskey. Patrick coaxed Rosaleen to take several swallows, and everyone was grateful when she collapsed from exhaustion and grief.

The next morning, Rosaleen awoke with the terrible realization that her new husband was dead. The last time anyone had seen Blaise was at sun up as he rode toward the Beg Bamba. In the distance, the Thompsons' foreman, Rogers, had seen a group of

riders pursuing Blaise. They chased him until they cornered him above a waterfall. Rogers heard a round of gunfire and saw Blaise take a bullet and topple over the falls. Rogers couldn't outshoot the mob, so he hid. As the men passed him, Rogers recognized the leader as Lance Kincaid.

Rogers had returned to the Thompsons' ranch and gathered a search party. They hunted for hours but never located Blaise's body. However, blood was found where he had fallen over the falls, proving he had been shot. In time, the body would probably wash up downstream.

The next day, Rosaleen stayed in bed, unable to face the callers who came to offer their condolences. One particular visitor claimed to be Blaise's cousin. How sinister he looked with his unkempt beard, disheveled appearance, and a patch over one eye. His presence disturbed Rosaleen and she refused to speak with him, afraid he was one of Kincaid's men.

That afternoon, Rosaleen poured the lukewarm water from the pitcher into the basin and used a wet cloth to bathe. As she finished, she heard a knock at the door.

"Rosaleen Katherine, 'tis Mama. May I speak with ye?"

She didn't want to face anyone but knew her mother was worried about her. "Aye, Mama."

When Rosaleen opened the door and saw the concern on her mother's face, she felt what little reserve she had slip away. She gripped the washcloth to her mouth, trying to stifle the pain that seemed to boil within her chest. Her stomach clenched and she felt nauseated. "Mama," was all she managed before falling into her mother's arms.

Maureen cradled her daughter, rocking her gently as she would a small child. Rosaleen continued to weep, clasping her mother close, afraid to release her. Her body shook as though she fought a high fever, but it was despair that plagued her soul.

“Mama, it hurts so much I cannot bear it. Why would God do this to me? Am I so wicked and unworthy that He is punishin’ me? I’ve prayed and prayed, but He doesn’t hear me. I’ve tried to have faith Blaise would be found alive. I’ve asked God if he’s alive, but I hear no answer.”

Rosaleen sobbed until exhaustion overcame her. Maureen continued to hold her, listening, as Rosaleen began to purge the anger, the fear, and the sadness bottled up inside her.

Maureen removed a handkerchief from her apron pocket and wiped the tears from Rosaleen’s cheeks, then handed the cloth to Rosaleen to wipe her nose. Guiding Rosaleen to the bed, Maureen patted the place next to her. Rosaleen eased her body down, feeling a momentary respite from her torture.

“My dear daughter, I wish I could take this trial from ye, but I cannot.” Tears glistened in Maureen’s eyes. “Please do not feel that God is punishin’ ye for any wrongdoin’. He does not work that way, lassie. He loves us.”

“Then why, Mama? Why would God take Blaise from me? Why would He allow Blaise to die such a cruel death? I do not understand.”

Maureen sighed. “Oh, Rosaleen, we do not always understand God’s plan, but we must have faith. None of us is free from trials and tribulations in this life. ’Tis how we endure them that matters. Remember, God chastens those He loves.”

Rosaleen shook her head slowly. “I still do not understand, Mama. I used Blaise to get us all to California, but I ended up fallin’ in love with him.”

Tears started to fall again, and Rosaleen nearly choked as she tried to continue. “I did not get a chance to tell him I loved him. I’m cursed, Mama. I thought I was so wise and grown up, but right now I feel like a child.”

Maureen bit her lip and brushed a tear from her cheek. “I’m

sure Blaise knew ye loved him, lass. And, remember, his body is still missin'. Have faith in God. He can make miracles."

Rosaleen sniffed. "Do ye think Blaise may still be alive, Mama?"

"I do not know, darlin'. I do have faith in God, though. I pray for His will to be done and that ye may have the strength to accept it."

As Rosaleen prepared for bed that night, she got on her knees and prayed fervently. She spilled out the feelings of her heart and prayed that God would be merciful. *Please forgive me, Father, for my despair. Give me the strength to bear this. And if it be Thy will, please brin' Blaise back to me safely.*

Rosaleen tried not to think of her last night with Blaise, but the vision kept haunting her even as she slept. When they had finally consummated their marriage, she had felt such a strong love for him that it frightened her. If only she could turn the clock back and beg him not to leave her.

* * * * *

Every day, one or more neighbors rode out and searched for Blaise. They all prayed a miracle would happen and they would find him alive. Family friends as far away as Stockton brought food to Beg Bamba, along with their sympathy.

When there was still no sign of Blaise's body after two weeks, Mr. Thompson and several of the other neighboring ranchers came to the Beg Bamba. The sheriff in Stockton refused to investigate Blaise's death, saying that with no body, there was no proof a crime took place. Everyone knew the sheriff worked for Lance Kincaid.

The searching did prove one thing—that Blaise couldn't have survived the fall. His body could still show up, but it seemed likely

that Kincaid had found the body and disposed of it. Whatever had happened, the family needed to hold funeral services. The Thompsons offered their home for the dinner that would follow the funeral, and the O'Shays gratefully accepted their offer.

The morning of the funeral, Rosaleen prepared herself. She felt as though she was giving up on Blaise and losing faith that he may still be alive. Her mother tried to reassure her that it was the proper thing to do—to create a place where loved ones could mourn the departed. But Rosaleen vowed to never give up faith that Blaise would be found alive. A body would have to be found before she would accept the fact she was a widow. *Please, Lord, let me husband still be alive. I have faith in Thee.* How many times had she whispered those words lately?

Silently, the O'Shay clan proceeded to the Buckshot Ranch. Rosaleen didn't want Blaise buried, empty casket or not, on the Buckshot Ranch. He was her husband, and she wanted him to rest in peace near her. Patrick begged Rosaleen not to insist on having her way. Her father felt Blaise's final resting place should on his parents' ranch. In her weak and vulnerable condition, Rosaleen relented, but she still believed Blaise was alive and would come crawling through their bedroom window one night. If—no, *when* he did—she would give him the worst tongue-lashing he ever received before she ran into his arms.

When they reached the Buckshot Ranch, Patrick helped Rosaleen and her mother from the wagon. Rosaleen glanced around, surprised at the large reception. Familiar faces floated in front of her, one seeming to melt into the other. The laughter pierced her eardrums until she wanted to scream. What did they find so amusing when her life was over? Did they not love Blaise as she did? She clutched her mother's arm. "Please, Mama, help me through this. I cannot bear all these people."

Maureen patted her daughter's hand, her eyes bright with

unshed tears. "Some people are insensitive, darlin'. They do not really mean anythin' by it. I know 'tis hard to bear, but God is right here beside ye. He'll give ye the strength ye need."

Rosaleen said a silent prayer and then dazedly allowed her parents to guide her to the family cemetery.

The preacher opened with a prayer and then proceeded with Psalm 23. How Rosaleen wished Reverend Donovan were there to say the cherished words.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He maketh me to lie down in green pastures:
He leadeth me beside the still waters.
He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the
paths of righteousness for his name's sake.*

*Yea, though I walk through the valley of
the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for
thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they
comfort me.*

*Thou preparest a table before me in the
presence of mine enemies: thou anointest
my head with oil; my cup runneth over.*

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the
house of the Lord for ever.*

Rosaleen tried to blink back the tears. How was she going to endure this ache in her heart, the loneliness and the guilt? She squeezed her eyes shut and tried to drown out the preacher's words. If she didn't listen, maybe it would all go away. At least

with the heavy black veil she wore, no one could see the grief on her face.

Rosaleen heard weeping and looked around to see a pretty, young woman about her age clinging to an older, somber-faced couple in their fifties.

Senora Buckley and her daughters stood a short distance from the young woman. The senora offered Rosaleen a sympathetic smile as she dabbed away her own tears.

Once more, Rosaleen tried to drown out the monotonous voice of the preacher. How could he stand and talk about Blaise when he didn't even know him?

Just then, a man standing alone caught her attention. With his cowboy hat pulled low over his face, he cautiously watched her every move, like a cat guarding a mouse. Rosaleen looked more closely at him and recognized him as the man claiming to be Blaise's cousin. With a shudder, Rosaleen moved closer to her father. When she glanced back, the strange man was gone.

Directly after the services, a kind neighbor brought the O'Shays' wagon around while mourners paid their respects to Rosaleen and her family.

Rosaleen felt a tug at her arm and turned to see the young woman she had noticed earlier. Rosaleen gasped aloud. The young lady was a mirror image of Blaise.

"Please, Mrs. Cameron, I must speak with you, but not here. Please meet me at the Thompsons'."

Before Rosaleen had a chance to answer, the woman cried out in dismay. Rosaleen looked up and saw Lance Kincaid approaching them. Bile rose in her throat. This horrible man was responsible for Blaise's death!

"You wouldn't be spreading any tales would you, Amanda dear? Remember what I told you earlier." Kincaid looked toward the top story of the Spanish-style hacienda.

The young woman's fear-filled eyes followed the direction he indicated, and she brought her hand to her mouth. Rosaleen saw a woman looking out of a second-story window. The girl let out a strangled cry and fled into the crowd.

With a scornful laugh, Kincaid focused his attention on Rosaleen. "How ungentlemanly of me. I haven't paid my respects to the weeping widow. I'll be sympathetic of your plight and give you one week to get off my property."

Rosaleen screamed like a banshee and lunged for Kincaid. She slapped him and then raked her fingernails across his cheek. "I hate ye, ye murderer! If I were a man, I'd kill ye!"

Kincaid grabbed Rosaleen's arm and held it so tight she thought it would break. With his other hand, he brought a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped the blood from his cheek. "I wouldn't let that stop me." He flung Rosaleen to the ground. "Get off my property, you Irish tramp." Then he laughed. "On second thought, I'll make you my bond servant until your parents pay me all they owe for squatting on my land."

Terror filled Rosaleen's heart. Her father and Shawn were beside her in an instant, and then she felt her mother's arms around her. She was grateful Shannon and Janna were safe at home.

"You're not going to do anything but go to jail, Kincaid."

Rosaleen looked up, grateful to the person brave enough to stand up against Lance Kincaid and his men. She was surprised to see the man with the eye patch.

Kincaid motioned his men to come forward. "Who do you think you are, interfering in my private business?"

"I'm the lady's husband," the man replied with a chuckle. "I think that gives me every right."

This stranger claimed to be Blaise, but that just couldn't be true. It had to be some kind of joke, and a cruel one at that.

“What kind of fool do you take me for?” Kincaid grew serious. “Blaise Cameron is dead.”

“Our son speaks the truth, Kincaid,” an older man said as he approached the group, a woman holding to his arm. “It’s all over. You might as well give up. You have no one left to bargain with.”

Everyone went silent. The young woman who had spoken with Rosaleen only minutes before ran to embrace the woman on the arm of the man claiming to be Blaise’s father.

Rising to her feet, Rosaleen felt her senses reel. She looked at her father for an explanation.

“’Tis true, lassie. That man is Blaise, all right. Yer husband ’tis not dead. I knew all along but was sworn to secrecy.”

Blaise was alive? Why would he let her suffer, thinking he was lost to her forever?

Within minutes, Yankee soldiers surrounded the place, and Kincaid’s men threw down their firearms and raised their hands in defeat.

Suddenly, Kincaid pulled a gun and aimed it at Blaise. Rosaleen screamed just as Blaise fired his gun, shooting Kincaid in the shoulder. Total mayhem broke out, as people ran screaming for cover.

Blaise ran to Rosaleen. “Are you all right, darling? He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

Still unsure if it was truly her husband behind the shaggy hair and beard, Rosaleen stepped back, but he reached for her and embraced her. “It’s really me, darling. Must I prove it, gramachree? Now does that confirm it is I, my Irish Rose? You surely didn’t call too many men the love of your heart.”

At the stunned look on Rosaleen’s face, Blaise laughed. “Yes, I knew what you called me all along.”

With tears streaming down her cheeks, Rosaleen put her arms

around his neck and held him close. "Yer alive me asthor, me true love. How? Why? I do not understand."

Blaise took Rosaleen by the hand and led her through the crowd and into the house. He pulled her into a study and closed the door, silencing the clamor outside.

Rosaleen turned to him, her eyes now blazing. "What is the meanin' of this ruse, and how come me own da knew the truth and not me? Do ye realize what I've been goin' through, mournin' ye day and night? 'Tis unforgivin' what ye did."

"Rosaleen, hear me out, please. I know the pain and anguish you've suffered, and I felt like a monster for putting you through all this."

Blaise guided her to a settee. "Here, let's sit down, darling."

She sat next to him, still not ready to forgive him.

"Do you remember what I told you back in Pittsburgh?"

Rosaleen nodded.

"I told you I needed a wife with no questions asked. Well, something was wrong at home. My parents' lives were at stake, and I couldn't tell anyone what I knew or what I planned to do."

"Yer parents weren't in Europe?"

"No, I only told you that to protect you. I didn't want Kincaid to use you as another pawn against me. I figured the less you knew, the safer you'd be."

"Did me da know all this?"

"Not at first. When I returned from Sacramento, I told him the truth. It was his idea to fake my death."

"Where have ye been, then? They looked for weeks, and they found all that blood!"

"Jonas, a friend from the war, was spying on Kincaid as a ranch hand. He's been staying in a shack not far from the ranch. The plan was for me to fall into the water unharmed. Unfortunately, I suffered a minor flesh wound in the process. Jonas fished me out

of the water and took me to the shack.”

Rosaleen grabbed Blaise, feeling for a wound. “Are ye all right? Do ye need a doctor?”

Blaise shook his head. “I’m fine now.”

“Who is the girl outside? Are that man and woman really yer parents?”

“She’s my sister, Amanda, and the couple is my parents. When Kincaid thought he’d killed me, he sent for Amanda. You see, once Kincaid thought I was no longer a threat to him, he thought he could bring my parents out of hiding and force them into signing the ranch over to him by threatening to kill Amanda next.”

“This is so confusin’!”

“Let me start at the beginning, darling,” Blaise said gently. “When I returned from the war, Amanda told me Kincaid was holding our parents captive. But the only proof they might be alive was Father’s signature on the legal documents for the ranch. I had to come home and pretend I didn’t know what Kincaid was up to.”

“Why did ye need a wife to find yer parents? Why did ye not just come to the Buckshot Ranch and demand that Kincaid leave?”

“The reason I needed you, my darling wife, was that my father made a stipulation in his will that I had to be married to inherit the ranch. If I came back home without a wife, I couldn’t fight Kincaid legally unless I found my parents. I couldn’t storm the ranch, because Kincaid would have shot me on sight.

“But I got more than I bargained for when I met you. You and your family helped me find God again. For the first time in years, I realized how much my life was lacking without Him. You made me realize that He didn’t leave me, but that I left Him. I’ll never deny His presence again.”

“I’m so happy for ye, darlin’! The Lord had a plan for both of us, I be thinkin’. With the Lord’s help, ye got your comrades from the war to help ye?”

“Truly, it must have been divine intervention. A friend of mine, Ross Peterson, came looking for a job after the war. I explained to him what I knew about Kincaid, and I introduced him to my attorney, Mr. Withers, in Pittsburgh. Ross helped me convince his superiors to help me fight Kincaid. The North wanted Kincaid for war crimes—for blockade running and selling war surplus to the enemy.

“The army agreed to help if I came up with a plan, so I did. I faked my own death and had your father make sure they buried me on the ranch. Kincaid couldn’t stop a funeral if he wanted to. With so many people on the grounds, he didn’t even suspect foul play. As soon as Jonas and Ross had my parents safe, I signaled the cavalry to infiltrate the ranch.

“What I didn’t know was that my father’s brother, Henry Cameron, was in cahoots with Kincaid. Uncle Henry telegraphed Kincaid and told him my plans. Praise God I didn’t tell anyone about Jonas.

“When Mr. Withers discovered Uncle Henry was in league with Kincaid, he sent a telegram to Ross in Stockton, asking him to get word to me. And Kincaid had access to the telegraph office in Stockton.”

“Yer own uncle betrayed ye? Is he the man who brought yer sister to the funeral?”

“Yes. My uncle wanted my father out of the way so he could run the coal mine in Pittsburgh. Kincaid was to get the ranch for getting rid of my parents.”

“Yer father owned the coal mine where Da and Shawn worked?”

Blaise nodded. “Yes, darling. When I heard about the cave-in,

I investigated and found that my uncle was milking the company and refused to keep the mine in safe condition.”

“Then it was ye who gave the workers’ compensation.”

“Let’s just say I convinced my uncle it was the right thing to do,” Blaise said with a smile.

“What will happen to yer uncle now?”

“He’ll be taken to Pittsburgh with Kincaid.”

“I cannot believe all of this was goin’ on and I did not even know. Da and Shawn did not even say a word to me.”

“I have a lot to thank your father and Shawn for. I’ll never be able to repay them for my parents’ safety.”

“I’m just glad the nightmare is over.” Rosaleen wiped away a tear as it made its way down her cheek. “When I thought ye were dead I nearly died too. I loved ye so much and I did not even tell ye. That was the worst part for me to bear. I prayed God would spare ye, and He has answered me prayers.”

“But I already knew, darling, how much you loved me. I just didn’t know if you knew,” Blaise said softly. “You are so stubborn, Rosaleen Katherine.”

“How did ye know I loved ye?” Rosaleen asked a bit crossly. “Ye seem to come to yer own conclusions, Blaise Cameron. Ye did not even show me the respect to tell me yerself. Maybe I’ll change me mind and stop lovin’ ye.”

Blaise laughed as he pulled his pouting wife into his arms. “You know it was God’s will that we found each other, so stop threatening me, Rosaleen Katherine. You’re going to be around to help me build my own empire. We’re going to prove to my father that feeding cattle in the winter and keeping the best stock for breeding is the only way ranchers can survive. I have faith that God will soften my father’s heart. You and I will live happily ever after, with a dozen redheaded children to bounce on my knee.”

“There ye go again, plannin’ our life without even consultin’ me. And who do ye think will be havin’ all those children, bucko? Ye best be considerin’ me first . . .”

Blaise chuckled. “Are you ever going to give in, Rosaleen Katherine? I know how to stop you, and don’t try to protest, for it’s worked in the past.” Then Blaise took her in his arms and kissed his wild Irish Rose.

GLOSSARY OF IRISH WORDS

A

ababack: filthy

aingéal: angel

ainmhidh: brute, beast

alanna: child

amadan: fool

arraha: indeed

aroon: dear (term of endearment)

asthor: treasure, true love

B

bairn: child

banshee: a female spirit; woman of the fairies

beadagan: saucy fellow

beadradh: flirting, caressing

beg: little

beg Bamba: little Ireland

C

cailín: lass, girl

cailleach: old woman, witch

caoine: death chant

caomhain: husband

caulcannon: special dish made of mashed potatoes, parsnips,
and onions

cead míle fáilte: a hundred thousand welcomes

D

deabhol: devil

deas fionn cailín: pretty, fair-haired lass

F

feis: (faysh) festival

fionn: fair haired, white, beautiful

G

gramachree: love of my heart

gramachree, mise goal sibhse: love of my life, I love you

J

jackeen: trickster, blackguard

L

leannan: sweetheart

loch: lake

M

machree: my heart, my love

mavrone: my grief

mavoureen: my darling

mealltair: knave

mialach: lousy

mise goal sibhse: I love you

mucan: swine

N

nadur: temper

nochdachd: naked

O

ochagon: alas (exclamation of grief)

ogha: grandchild

P

puithar: sister

R

rath: circular earthen mound believed to be inhabited
by fairies.

S

seanair: grandfather

shenanigan: a trick

shilleah: a stick to hit with

slaughtear: rogue

About the Author

Deborah L. Weikel holds a bachelor's degree in elementary education. She enjoys craft-making and is an avid collector of vintage dolls and toys. Deborah resides in the scenic Columbia River Gorge in Washington State. Her first romance novel, *Under a Lakota Moon*, was published in 2009.

THEORY

Theory is the study of the principles and concepts that underlie the phenomena being investigated. It provides a framework for understanding the data and for developing hypotheses. The theory of the present study is based on the assumption that the phenomena being investigated are governed by certain principles and concepts. The theory is developed in a series of steps, starting from the basic principles and concepts and moving towards the specific hypotheses and predictions. The theory is then tested by comparing the predicted results with the actual results. The theory is accepted if the predicted results are in good agreement with the actual results. The theory is rejected if the predicted results are in poor agreement with the actual results.

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Rosaleen O'Shay must marry a perfect stranger to help her family. Can she do it?

Rosaleen glanced down the street, took her mother's arm, and started to cross. Then she heard her mother scream just as a horse reared in front of them. Stumbling back, she tripped over her mother's foot and landed in the dirt.

"Ye filthy brute!" Rosaleen shouted. "What are ye doin', tryin' to kill me?"

"What in tarnation were you doing walking down the middle of the street? Don't you have any sense in that pretty little head of yours?"

Rosaleen looked up at the dirty soldier grinning down at her from his horse. She rose to her feet with as much dignity as possible. . . .

"How dare ye insinuate I'm in the wrong! Yer nothin' but a trail-dusty blackguard with the manners of a pig. . . . If ye cannot brin' yerself to help a lady in distress, at least ye could apologize for yer blunder."

"I don't see a 'lady' in distress," the soldier replied, casting Rosaleen a lopsided grin. He tipped his hat and winked at her, then urged his horse on down the street. . . .

Clearly, this soldier was accustomed to flirting with anyone who wore a skirt. Yet Rosaleen had to admit he had the most gorgeous blue eyes she'd ever seen. Even the sound of his voice caused her pulse to race.

It is May 1865. When Rosaleen O'Shay and her mother lose their factory jobs, and then her father and brother are injured in a coal-mine cave-in, the family is in serious trouble. Rosaleen worries they will never save enough money to fulfill their dream—to leave Pittsburgh and buy a farm in California. Hoping to give her a better life, Rosaleen's father secretly arranges to marry her off to Blaise Cameron, a young man on his way to his parents' ranch near Stockton, California. In a twist of fate, Blaise turns out to be the soldier from the street—the one Rosaleen considers a blackard. To make matters worse, Blaise has a plan—and dubious motives for taking a wife—so Rosaleen will have to drive a hard bargain of her own. Will Blaise tame the fiery redhead and make her truly his? Or will he annul the marriage as promised when he has achieved his objectives? And will Rosaleen realize that unusual beginnings can lead to happily ever after?

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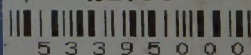
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